

DEATHCREATOR

BOOK THREE: AMBIENT DECAY

EXPLICIT EDITION



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Synopsis from Deathcreator Book Two: The Dark March

John awakens to Belairia's severed head and learns the brutal secret of the human town from her and Bob. With rage in his heart and Threscia in his head, he restores the goblins and turns them into a formidable fighting force.

He then gathers his mates and meets Ralphus in the woods. Ralphus wants his wife to be brought back. John listens to him tell her story and finds a deep side to the mysterious necromancer. He brings back Languoria, and she and Ralphus have a touching reunion. He then gets them up to speed on what's happening, and Ralphus teaches the girls some spells. Lil'sis seems to be the only one who really takes to it, and he tutors her in his own magic.

Later that night, John meets a Deathknight inside his core who claims to be Threscia's magic teacher. He learns the corpse explosion spell and promises to bring him back later. The Deathknight refuses to give his name and instead introduces himself as Thrall.

John returns to his gobs and they begin training. He chooses the scarred ones, and through constant killing and being killed, they lose their fear. He names them his berserkers.

The next day everyone heads out on a march to show the humans the errors of their ways. They make slow progress toward the human town and stumble upon one of Thads's old camps. There, they find girls long dead, cast into an old latrine. For the first time, the dark god's power seeps out of John while he digs. With each new corpse, he loses more of himself. Threscia comforts him and takes the girls partial souls inside herself. That night no one sleeps well.

The following day, everyone who survived the first camp has nightmares that John wakes them up from. Nex's nightmare was so vivid that she tries to stop John from marching.

John fights an internal battle with himself, but after seeing the other girls, he can't bring himself to delay any

longer. He chooses to march on toward Thads's camp to get his supplies and the torches he left.

They take a moment, and there's a blast that obliterates Bob and kills John. A battle ensues, but Lina is killed, and the child she carries is lost.

Bob meets his goddess and an older version of himself. The two of them decide to send this version of Bob back to live again.

John fights his rage, and with Mors and his gobs, the battle is won. John takes bloody vengeance against the commander and ends up on the receiving end of a resurrection spell.

There he sees his old life, where he lived in apathy working with his old friend Harold on what they called the delirium demo. John sleeps one night but awakens to find himself standing in an open doorway, bloodied sword in hand. His neighbors are dead and dying, and the police shoot him as Mors screams at him to come back.

He manages to take Caroline's soul and mend Sid before he dies once more, returning to his world.

John is still mostly immobile and gives control of his body over to Threscia, who finishes the battle using techniques she's learned from John's memories.

Later, as John recovers, Threscia carries on his duties in his stead. News of her sister, as well as many others disappearances reaches her. Ralphus gives her his nightmare bugs, and Threscia wastes no time integrating them and gaining their abilities. She hands John's core off to Leera and runs off to join the search.

John awakens in the body of a dead horse. He fleshcrafts himself back together and mends his injured gobs before joining the search for his missing people.

Fura awakens in a dark place. She tries to save a goblin boy and his sister only to come face to face with her mother, who calls her an abomination.

Lil'sis, Roscia, and Wendy try to make sense of the dark place they're in and discover that Wendy's blood can dissolve the walls. They observe a rotting wolf as it takes a body over and realize something terrible is happening. They fight and run until Belairia shows up and kills a diseased bear. It bolsters their confidence, and after Lil'sis begins using the necromancer spells she learned from Ralphus, they manage not only to fight but to win against anything they encounter. Until they finally see Fura...

John finds the location of his people, and with Bob's help they enter the living cavern along with Threscia and Thrall. When they find the girls surrounded by hundreds of dead, diseased animals, John takes pride in his daughters' strength.

After that he finds Fura and defeats her mother, separating the two. Finally, John and Fura develop a bond and he officially accepts her.

He brings back the ones who died and crafts mounts and modifications for his people to travel more quickly. They arrive at the human town by nightfall and rip them all from their cozy beds to pay the piper.

John roots out the ones responsible for the heinous acts and slaughters them like animals, letting them watch as their own people eat them.

He then turns them into torches and binds the rest of the adult villagers in a circle. He kills them over and over while each watches, knowing their turn is coming. Eventually the humans lose their fear of death and submit. As he looks at the faces of his adopted daughters, he decides to show mercy to the humans, though he doesn't feel they deserve it.

As they all gather around, he holds out his hand and makes them take a pledge of loyalty.

Chapter 1: The Past Month — John

I sat in the old church in the center of town on a throne of bone I'd constructed myself. Green light flickered from the flaming heads of the former village chief and his two cronies, which I'd lovingly impaled atop my throne.

My gobs had decided that this was the best possible place for me, as it was the largest building. The townsfolk had long neglected it before I took it, and dust still lined the makeshift benches that once passed for pews.

The people had abandoned this place when they had abandoned hope.

When I'd first arrived at the church, it had been covered in religious portraits of their goddess. Most lay in tatters, their colors marred by time, but I saw why people worshipped her. She looked kind, merciful, and perfect, like someone without a care in the world — the sort of girl I could never get along with. Anyone with who looked like that must live a life of delusion.

She had an expression that said, 'My shit smells like roses, and you're blessed to be in its presence.' There was something off about her eyes, and when I stared at them, a feeling of hate came over me. Those pictures were the first things I burned when the pyres were built.

My torches now hung from every doorway and lined the road, dimly illuminating everything in a pale green. Unfortunately, the number would likely continue to grow.

Though I had killed them again and again, then reformed each person to give them abilities, a handful of them still turned on me a week later. There was something rotten about this place, especially in the human population I had encountered so far.

The leader of this small rebellion was Celairia's and Belairia's father. I'd like to say I was surprised, but that man was pure scum. Even after he let his daughters be killed twice, he still had the gall to turn on them again, calling them monsters. But it wasn't me who quelled this rebellion, it was Celairia — Lil'sis, as she prefers to be called. My daughters have taken to the names Bob gave them as a way to separate who they were from who they are now — a way to become stronger and embrace the things they must do.

Lil'sis now commanded a small group of zombies, chief of which was her father. She says now at least she can trust him. To my great dismay, she and Athen are hanging out more now and have begun to write...poetry.

Lil'sis is quite talented, but I once read one of Athen's poems. I hadn't been aware there were that many angsty words that rhyme with 'fart.'

The town's reconstruction has been going smoothly. Blue took over the abandoned blacksmith's shop and has made several items the town needs. Red, along with some of the older gobs, and the village carpenters have also been at work restoring dilapidated buildings and turning them into respectable gob hovels.

I sent Bob, Thrall, and my men out to scout the surrounding areas. They've since found two more villages. They will send me a 'sacrifice' or a tribute of food each month — Thrall's idea. Of course, once the sacrifices arrive, I'll just be restoring the poor SOBs before putting them to work. I guess it's something the people here understand because they didn't seem to object.

I closed my eyes and laid my head back. I didn't enjoy just sitting here all day, but Reginauld told me it was a show of strength and stature, both as god and chief of our people.

I couldn't help thinking that I'm now like the last boss. Though I don't have a castle, I feel very Draculesque. I swear, the next time a villager walks in, I'm going to

perform a deep-sounding monologue and hurl a goblet before transforming.

Shit, I could actually do that. Come to think of it, do crosses and holy water work against me as an undead? Does this world even have those? What about in my living form? I seem to remember something the book fairy said, but it's all rather vague now.

I felt a thump against my chest and a weight on my lap. I opened my eyes to see Lina's smiling face looking back at me. I stroked her hair and hugged her close. Her baby bump was really showing now. It seems like I was right; at this rate she'll be pregnant every month, and she's close to term now.

We don't talk about what happened anymore — about the one we lost. But it's always there in the back of our minds.

I ran my hands down her stomach and held them there as we smiled at each other. I leaned in, and we shared a tender kiss that gradually turned into more. She stood on my lap and untied my pants with her talons, something she had gotten quite good at lately.

"Lina, we can't..."

She took the twins out of their home and gripped one tightly with a talon. "We can."

"I don't want to hurt the baby. If I did, I couldn't live with myself."

She began stroking. "What about if you put it in my..." She began to blush in a way that only she could, and I kissed down her neck as she increased her pace.

A small grin formed on my face, and I couldn't fight the urge to tease her.

"In your...what?"

"In my..." she trailed off.

"Say it, or I won't know."

"In my..."

"What? I couldn't quite hear you there. Say it loud and clear, or it won't happen."

She began panting as I made my way to her small, swollen breasts.

"In my a..." she trailed off again.

"Louder! Say what you want."

She blushed a deep crimson as her breath began coming out in hot puffs of smoke.

"I want it in my ass!!"

Someone cleared their throat and Lina's body went stiff, her eyes wide.

"I'm terribly sorry to interrupt Chief but we captured some mercenaries."

Lina turned mechanically and flew out of the room as the captured mercenaries were shoved in.

I nodded to each and gestured to a pew. "Sit them there."

Reginauld cleared his throat again as the mercs looked at me with shocked expressions. "Chief, I believe you should pu—"

"It's quite alright, Reginauld. I can take it from here."

Monologue time! Now, to say something deep.

I stood. "What is humanit—" My pants hit the floor.

Oh yeah, I probably should have put the twins away.

"Uh, hmm..."

I quickly pulled up my pants and sat back down. Several awkward moments of silence passed, and for some reason the mercs didn't seem too talkative, so I turned my attention to Reginauld.

"So, you said these were mercenaries. Where did you catch them, and what were they doing?"

"It was not I who caught them, Chief, it was a group of our young gobs." Reginauld's expression turned dark. "These men attacked them. If it wasn't for Healer and Leera, two of our young might have died."

I felt a slow rage come over me and heard a few gobs outside startle as Fernando came barging into the room. He

was the size of a small horse now, and to everyone else he still looked like the stuff of nightmares.

He joined me at my side and I held my hand at the ready to take back my heavy form. He sensed my hostility and opened his mandibles wide, flexing his massive fangs and covering the ground below with sizzling, acidic venom.

One of the mercenaries began shaking uncontrollably, while the other two appeared catatonic.

I activated soul steal, pretty sure I was about to need it.

"So, you thought you would just stroll into my town and attack our children?" I yelled in Therossian, hiding none of my anger.

They all remained silent except the shaking one, who yelped and looked away.

"They're just children, you know, green though they might be. They're just kids, normal kids like you would find anywhere, but because of assholes like *you*, they have to grow up hard. They have to learn to fight when they should be learning to read and write. And yes, oh yes, we teach them to fight."

I fleshcrafted a massive chunk of bone from Fernando and formed it into a long, jagged blade. I held it to the throat of the skittish one. "They kicked your sorry asses, after all. So tell me, who decided that trying to kill our young was a good idea?"

I smelled something revolting as the merc lost control of his bowels.

"It... It-it was..."

"Too late." I decapitated him in three long, sawing strokes as he choked and sputtered blood.

I held his still-blinking head at eye level with the next merc. "Your turn now. If you keep me waiting, then I'll repeat this with you." I re-infused the coward's soul back into his head, and as the green flames shot out I impaled it onto a spike on my throne.

"Now, why are you here, and who sent you?"

He swallowed hard. "This ain't worth the coin my family would receive for my 'onorable death. I'll tell ya. It were the village of Evergreen. They said that they 'ad some weird goblins makin' 'em pay tribute an' pointed us yer way. They asked for an army, but we was all they could afford. Besides, ain't no armies in Therograd n'more these days, so they sent us. It was just 'posed to be a goblin extermination."

The last merc's face turned beet red. "That's it, you worthless cutthroat. You're out of the guild. Even if it means death, you never betray the client!"

"Are you shittin' me? This ain't jus' death 'ere. This's some sort of freaky necro-soul juju like my grandma used to dabble in. And this guy ain't like no goblin I ever saw. If you want to be stubborn, let 'im carve you up and feed you to his void-beastie. If it means living or jus' not becoming whatever he turned Tonous into, then sign me up. If I 'ave to, I can suck a mean—"

"Coward! How can you throw your own kind under the wagon like this? I wo—"

I decapitated the uncooperative one faster than the last guy, leaving only the cutthroat. I had no intention of listening to this two-merc drama routine. I re-infused his soul and impaled him on the opposite side of the throne from his partner.

I stopped for a minute to admire my handiwork. I'm no interior decorator, but having a couple more flaming heads really spruces up the place. Maybe it's the added lighting. I gave Fernando a pat and fleshcrafted the bone blade back into him.

"You have earned leniency," I said to the remaining merc. "I will not kill you just yet."

The cutthroat sighed with relief as I threw him over my shoulder and exited the church.

Athen was waiting outside, and I called to him.

He rolled his single visible eye and stood in front of me with his arms crossed.

Damn, goblins mature too quickly. I missed the naive boy who had admired me just a month and a half ago. Well, hopefully he'll soon get to the respectful adult stage and not this...whatever it is.

"Alright, my boy, I have a job for you. Grab a couple of your men and go to Evergreen. Bring me back the village head's...well, head. Wait, why are you wearing an eyepatch?"

He threw his head back and covered his left eye. "Don't talk to me with such familiarity! I'm the shadow-ninja Silver Moonslicer, cursed to live in mortal form. If I were even to look at you with my left eye, you would burst into dark flames... But this power is my burden and mine alone. I have only one ally, Necrella the dark-black demoness of black darkness. She's powered by the souls of her victims, but whatever she touches dies, so she's cursed to never love another..."

I couldn't fight the urge to facepalm. "So you're both alone...together?"

He smiled as he released his left eye. "Yeah!"

"Okay then, Lord Shadow-Ninja-Moonsilver. Please go kill the village head in Evergreen. Necrella, the dark, black, black-dark demoness of dark blackness can go with you if she wants. So you won't be alone, even though you're not taking your men."

"No, it's the shadow-ninja Silver Moonslicer!"

"Are you sure about that name? Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh... Oh yeah, of darkness."

I patted his head as I sighed inwardly. "Great, shadow-ninja, I humbly request your assistance. Do you accept the mission I've given you?"

He bowed. "Yes, oh dark lord of the blackest void. I will do your bidding and punish evil!"

With that he leaped onto the roof and immediately fell through it.

The embarrassment I felt was so great I might have died; the only solace I had is that I'm going to be teasing him about this for years to come. Also, I'm pretty sure we qualify as the evil that people are trying to punish.

I pretended not to see the great shadow-ninja sneak out the front door behind me as I headed toward the healers with a chuckling cutthroat on my back.

I was pretty sure Threscia was to blame for Athen and Lil'sis's recent behavior. Threscia herself had been through several changes since we got here. She now had mandibles, and all her visible skin had been replaced by malleable chitin. Sometimes I woke up to find her clinging to the ceiling just watching me. I wasn't sure what was happening to her anymore. I would be worried, but I know she's a smart woman, and these changes she's making to herself seem to keep her self-destructive streak under control. Besides, I still feel her allegiance as my champion, and her pulling sensation is the strongest of all my followers.

I walked to the healers and dropped the thug like a bag of potatoes. I often wonder why people are always dropping potatoes like this. It seems like you would bruise them.

Leera came up and gave me a hug and a peck on the cheek.

"How are they doing?" I asked as I parted the nearby curtain to look in.

"They're fine, but the boy might lose his eye if you don't mend him later."

I looked at the kid. It was the red-haired lad who had taken a liking to Fura. Among other lesser injuries, he had a slash that started from the top right of his face and went all the way down to his chest. Healer — *damn, I need to give that guy a better name*— was applying some sort of salve while he slowly sealed the boy's wounds with magic.

"And the girl?"

"She's fine now. The boy jumped in front of her and took most of the punishment. She only had a sprained ankle and a mild concussion."

I dragged the thug over and sat him in front of the two youths.

"Did this guy do anything to you?"

The boy weakly propped himself up on his elbows and looked at him. "Not this one, he was hiding behind the other two like a coward."

The thug raised his bound hands. "If I may, I'm a cutthroat. I don't take the front lines. I kill people from behind. This 'ere goblin extermination ain't my bag; I jus' came along fer the coin. I was s'posed to watch their backs. Ha, the irony. Once I saw them kids put up a decent fight, I 'id in the bushes, and that's where your men with them glowy eyes got me. Shame, though, I never 'ad no problems 'iding before."

"You seem like the sort that likes making deals. What's your life worth to you, cutthroat?"

"You said you would spare me!"

"I added 'just yet' at the end when I said I wouldn't kill you," I reminded him.

"But these 'ere kids jus' cleared me! I didn't lay a finger on 'em!"

"That may be true, but I wonder just how far you would have gone if your people hadn't had any problems. Your actions were motivated by simple self-preservation. You probably thought something like, 'If their kids are this strong, then what happens when we come across the parents?' Am I right?"

He began to shake. I couldn't tell if it was out of fear or rage. He pursed his lips as if he were trying to hold something in, but it was no use. He exploded in laughter.

"Ha, you got me there. Yeah, if everyone was weak, then I would've joined 'em in the slaughter. I likes to keep me morals light and me coinpurse 'eavy."

"Do you use a bow? Daggers?"

"I use a pair of daggers... Where you goin' with this, bruv?"

"So ambidextrous then. Hold out both your hands."

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait, did I say a pair? Yeah, I really just hold 'em both in me left 'and."

I sighed as I cut his remaining bonds. "Fine, then hold out your left hand."

He shakily held out his hand, and I used fleshcrafting to remove his pinky. I stripped it of flesh and turned the bone into a tiny macuahuitl. I ripped a length of fabric from a nearby roll of bandages and made a pendant and handed it to the boy.

"Here, this is a trophy to show for your bravery today. You defended your sister and this village at the cost of your own blood and pain. Keep the scars, and you can join my berserkers when you're older."

The kid smiled up at me and clenched the pendant to his chest. He'd been through a lot, this one. I was just happy to see that he grew stronger under the weight of experience and didn't let it crush him. He's already the sort of person I respect, and I'd like to see him grow stronger.

The cutthroat looked at me while stifling tears. "You didn't 'ave to do that..." he complained petulantly.

"Count yourself lucky; I'm not known for my mercy. Now, what's your life worth to you? I won't ask a third time..."

I thought maybe I should just kill him and have Mors use his memories to tell me everything he knows. But no, if I could turn him I could use his connections, maybe even turn him into a spy so I don't enter Therograd blind.

"Alright, alright! Anything, jus' ask."

"What do you know about Therograd, a guy named Thads and the Duke?"

"You threatened me an' took my pinky jus' fer that? I would've told you for free."

Chapter 2

The cutthroat blared on and on about all the little happenings and personal politics in Therograd. He had a healthy understanding of the city's underworld and how someone could get in or out undetected.

He also told me that the Duke left a few weeks ago with his army and headed to join something called the crusade. I wasn't sure what that was, but it didn't sound good. Unfortunately, Marrow, as our cutthroat called himself, didn't know much about it either. He just knew that they were recruiting aggressively throughout the kingdom and not offering any compensation for joining.

He'd never heard of someone named Thads. So if I wanted to know more, then I would need to go to Therograd myself. I had Reginauld fetch a blank roll of parchment from the former village head's home, which was now Reginauld's house. I spread it out on a nearby table and fleshcrafted my finger into a sharp, hollow point and filled it with blood. Then as everybody watched I drew a pentagram with my blood and added in several random squiggles.

I pulled Marrow over. "This contract seals your allegiance to me. After signing this, should you feel the need to double-cross me then your blood will boil you alive from the inside out. Sign here..."

I fleshcrafted my finger off and handed it to him. He reached out with a whimsically disgusted face and took it.

"First you take my finger, then you give me yours. You got a strange way about you, bruv."

"It's not a gift, just sign."

"Well, that's great an' all, but I can't read, let alone write."

We blinked at each other for several seconds.

Well, this was a bluff anyway—I don't know any contract magic, or even if it exists. And I didn't feel like taking the time to put this thug through English or Therossian classes... Wait a minute, I seem to remember watching a few Westerns where the people couldn't read and write. They used an X for a signature. Also, this guy's in the Mercenary Guild, so I'm sure he's had to sign things with them.

"Hey, you bastard. Stop playing games and sign!"

"Alright, alright, but my 'andwriting is atrocious."

I stared at him for a while, letting my increasing annoyance show. After a few moments he began to look around nervously.

Something's not right here. Is he looking for an escape, or is he expecting someone?

He looked down at the parchment and slowly wrote something, finishing it with a confident flourish.

I squinted at it, and it took me several minutes to read, but gradually my mind unscrambled his henscratch. 'Get Fucked!'

I looked up just in time to see him pulling something from his pants. He threw it at me, and it exploded in a cloud of black dust that filled the room.

I began to choke as I activated life sense. My eyes were on fire; everything burned. I stopped my heart and plowed through it. Once I was outside I searched around, but life sense can't discern between friend and foe. A few seconds later Reginauld, Leera, and Healer stumbled out with the children in their arms. All were coughing and rubbing their eyes.

That bastard! In a way, though, I admired his gall. At least now I know a little more about Therograd and how to get in. That is, if I can trust what he told me. But he didn't show any real love for the place or for the Duke, so for now I'd believe him. I got what I wanted from him, so he could go to hell for all I cared.

I helped Leera up, scooped up the children, and had Reginauld and Healer grab onto the chains of my harness. We all walked like a messed-up conga line to the well, where I washed myself, the children, and Leera. I handed the bucket to Reginauld, who immediately doused Healer and himself.

After cleaning around his eyes and nose, he looked at me. "Well, he got us good, didn't he? I took him for the devious type, but I didn't foresee that."

I canceled life sense and restarted my heart, only to have a coughing fit. "Yeah, I knew something was strange, but he's clever. At least I doubt he'll ever return again, having seen how this place is... Wait... That bastard stole my finger!" I knew I should be mad, but I don't know if it was the situation or the man's overall absurdity—I just laughed. "Who the hell steals a finger?"

I release a pheromone that said 'Come,' and Fernando came skittering through town. I rubbed my hand down his side and used his reserve to fleshcraft myself a new finger.

For some reason, Threscia also came running. She stood in front of me and put her hands on her hips. "Yeah, what'd you need?" She now spoke in a combination of voice and pheromones.

I looked her up and down. The black chitin looked almost like a finely crafted suit of armor. It came to points at her elbows and knees where it segmented. Her once-beautiful face had changed, but her eyes remained their normal clear blue, and even though she had abandoned her bulky chainmail and plate in favor of modified leather armor, my macuahuitl still hung proudly on her back.

She looked at me in mock annoyance as I smiled at her. "Some guy stole my finger."

I thought she would laugh, but instead her face contorted in rage. She screamed and dashed off like a demon without so much as a goodbye.

I know I still don't understand her, but things like this make me worry.

I looked around at Leera and the others, who were still recovering from the pepper bomb or whatever concoction the cutthroat had used.

Well, this cemented things. I'd need to go to Therograd sooner rather than later, and now I had a way in that doesn't involve an army. I could go and figure out where the Duke went and get some clues on Thads and this crusade. I might even be able to gather some intel and decide if that place should be left alone or conquered.

Hell, of course I'm still going to rip it apart and kill everyone involved in all this bored-noble cruelty. That's the only thing I can think of for motivation. Those with power abusing it—it's the same in any world. Though here they can show the brutality of an African warlord and still have the acceptance of the people. Yes, double standards and all that; I'm painfully aware I'm the same. But innocents and my own people aren't the ones I hurt. I need to find Red.

"Reginauld, if you're okay, then follow me. We're going to find Red."

Reginauld stopped wiping his eyes and stared at me. "Is it time for a move, Chief?"

"A small one maybe. The three of us will make plans for me to go to Therograd."

"What about Nex? Don't stay gone for too long or you may miss the delivery of my grandchild. And Sir, that is possibly the only thing you could do that would displease me."

It was strange to hear Reginauld speak like that. He's always walked the line between laid back and professional. He's never let his personal feelings show in anything he has done for me, other than to praise me.

"I won't miss it, nor will I miss my child with Lina. I will stay until Lina lays and hatches her egg and be back before Nex delivers."

After all I've been through with Lina, there's not a chance in hell I won't be there. We fought hard to have our baby, and I intend to enjoy every minute I can with mother and child. However, there are too many threats in this world for me to sit idly by while our enemies roam free. An ambush from the Duke cost me my last child. I won't allow it again. If they wanted to hurt me in a way I couldn't recover from, they'd found it in that last ambush.

I looked back at Healer. He was still an expressionless mute. He wasn't quite a blank-slate soul, but he was close to it. I'm not sure he'll ever become a fully functional person. He understood things you told him but never verbally responded. Like this I can't make myself hate him—all I feel is pity. Besides, he wasn't the mastermind, and he's not like the people he's made from. He's something else, something new. I'll let him pick his own name once he gains a personality.

He tilted his head at me as if wondering why I was watching him.

"Oh, it's nothing. I just had some stuff on my brain. Despite the looks I may give you, please know: You're not guilty."

He nodded and resumed healing the boy. After a while he helped him up and brought him over to me.

He grabbed my hand and placed it on the boy's eye.

"I get it, Healer. Boy, do you want to get stronger?"

The boy nodded, then winced as he accidentally pushed his injury into my palm.

"Then I will leave your scars. You requested to be formed with more muscle last time. This has given you an advantage and made training a little easier on you. So now let's take some advantages away."

I mended his eye and sealed his eyelid shut with a thin membrane.

"Your eye is fixed but held shut. Finish your training like this, and when you're older, I will unseal it after you join my

berserkers."

The boy frowned but nodded. His demeanor changed, he seemed determined and maybe...was he excited?

He looked up at me, his good eye twinkling. "Is this what you did to the great shadow-ninja Moonsilver, as well? Can I get a cool eyepatch too?"

Oh god. It must be infectious.

"It's Silver Moonslicer, actually."

Why the hell was I encouraging this?!

"Sweet! Do I get an awesome name like that?"

Why!? How had it come to this? I hate naming so damn much, and to add insult to injury it had to be a name like this.

I flipped back my non-existent hair to channel my inner teenager. "Sure... I name you... Sanguine, the Blood-Red Conqueror of Crimson Mist."

Leera busted out laughing until she started coughing again.

And with that, another part of me died.

The boy cheered, and the girl clapped for him with a little "woo."

"Alright, you two get on outta here, and, er, Sanguine, go ask Languoria to make you an eyepatch if she feels like it." I pointed them both toward what used to be town hall.

Ralphus had actually made a trip back to the Dark Academy alone after he collected a number of dead snakevines from the corpses and left Lang here to keep her from being swarmed and prodded. She had started a sort of school of her own for the young to learn to read and write, and she and Liz would teach magic to everyone after school using that Basics of Magic book that Barzealis gave me.

Though most of our older gobs didn't feel much like learning to read or write at first, once they saw what they could learn from a magic book, they started attending classes as well. Since everyone here has a mana-generating heart, most of our people can do at least one spell now.

On top of that, Red was running all our people through physical and combat training drills when he wasn't helping to build or make repairs. He also started the youngsters on sparring. In a way he may have indirectly saved that boy and girl by giving them the tools they needed to survive that encounter.

Somehow this place was shaping up into a good community.

Oh yeah! Red! I knew I was forgetting something.

I gave Leera a kiss goodbye as Reginauld and I walked off towards the hulking oni.

At least he's not hard to find.

He was wearing a pair of long work shorts the formerly human women had made for him. Apparently after getting an eyeful from under his toga every time he walked by, they started taking an interest in his modesty. Add to that the fact that all the men respect him, and he's actually become a surprisingly popular guy.

I called out to the oni, who sat down the logs he was carrying and knelt.

"My Lord, how may I be of service?"

"Come to the church, we need to have a meeting about village management in my absence."

The three of us walked to the church, which I chose because it was one of two buildings in town that Red could stand up in. The other was his house, which was furnished with nothing but two giant chairs that Blue made him and one giant straw bed. If we went there, I would feel like a doll having a tea party—though it would be funny to watch Reginauld try to look dignified in a giant chair.

I swung open the large double doors to the church and gestured them both in.

"Don't be shy, you two." I pointed to the Merc's bodies. "I brought snacks."

Chapter 3

We spoke for some time about town management and ways to increase our food stores and maintain security while I'm away. We'd be treating Riverbrook as our first settlement and the place where we'll raise our young. Keeping everyone safe and fed was my current goal, but I hadn't checked on things in a while.

Reginauld and the other goblin elders seem to think I'm a princess to be locked away, rather than their chief and commander. It's starting to grate on me. This was exactly what I didn't want, but I think I've humored them enough for now.

As we walked through the large double doors, the light from the midday sun threatened to scorch out my retinas. Reginauld also seemed to be affected. If I remembered correctly, the default goblin eyes were also sensitive to sunlight.

I looked around at the workers, more than a few of whom were holding their hands to their brows. Huh, maybe I was an asshole. I needed to call a town meeting and see what concerns everyone had. Because if I didn't even notice this, then what else was I missing? Maybe we needed a hat-maker.

Shit... That would end up being me, wouldn't it? To my knowledge I probably have the highest tailor skill here. Maybe I could train some of the housewives who made Red his pants. Yeah, we might bring in some tourism, or develop our first export. Maybe I could ask Fura to breed a fruit tree, then we could have bake sales! That might soften our image to the other two villages. But then again...goblin pies.

A couple of gob girls had stopped walking and were staring at me.

"Hey, why's he just standing there?"

"I don't know, he looks angry. Maybe now's not a good time to talk to him."

Ah, resting bitch face strikes again.

"Ooh, I bet he's thinking about something profound, like our next campaign, or eviscerating our enemies!"

I'm thinking about hats and pies!

The first gob girl nodded to the second one.

"Of course, that's our chief! Two-D—"

"Shhh! He doesn't like that nickname, and he can probably hear us!"

I locked eyes with the one who almost blurted out that which must not be spoken. They both blushed and bowed before running off.

I swear, someday I'll get Threscia back for all this. Though I guess eating bugs is a start.

I looked over to Reginauld, who still stood beside me, one hand shading his eyes and the other behind his back. Red seemed to notice his plight and stood by him to block the sun.

Yep, what a bunch of monsters we were. I thought back to the two men I'd killed earlier. Maybe I would consume their souls and let Mors fill in my map. Did they deserve death? Yes. But did they deserve to burn, maybe not. It could be a matter of ignorance, but no matter how you look at them, our children are obviously kids. Regardless of species, you don't hurt kids.

Nope, I think I'll let them be lighting for a while.

"Alright, Red, I'll leave you to go back to work. Reginauld, I'd like to call a town meeting tonight to see how everything is going. For now, I'm going to check on things around here."

Red nodded and walked back to the wood he'd put down before I interrupted him.

Reginauld looked up at me with squinted eyes now that his shade had left. "Sir, you should stay in the church so we can find you if anything happens."

"You're all my followers; I'll know before you do as long as someone prays to me for help. I'm not like some decrepit village elder, nor am I an idle god meant to be an object of worship. I've spent enough time staring at walls!"

"But our tradition states that when not at war, the chief is to be protected!"

"But anyone can challenge the chief?"

"Well, yes."

"So then I'm protected from everyone except anyone who wants to challenge me?"

"Yes, that's correct."

I looked into his eyes. I could see his resolve crumbling.

"And would you want the father of your grandchildren to be a man who is protected by everyone else? Someone who stays behind four walls and never does anything unless he has to and doesn't even know what's going on with his people?"

He took a deep breath. "No, that person would be a coward and a poor leader."

He slouched, and I patted his shoulders. *I swear, ever since Nex got pregnant her hormones seem to be rubbing off on him.*

"It's okay, my friend, just let me be me. You made me chief, so let me do the job my way."

I heard a loud bang followed by a familiar voice. Speak of the devil.

Reginauld and I ran towards the ruckus, only to find Nex holding a grizzled gob and a human by their throats.

"What do you mean you're out of fish?!" She threw the gob, and he collided with a bunch of firewood.

The other man in her hands pried her fingers loose enough to speak. "The fishermen haven't come back with today's catch yet."

He was surprisingly calm, but this wasn't an isolated incident. I've heard this man at least four times now making complaints about her attacking him over one meal or

another. He should probably just set aside a Nex food pile to avoid this later.

Her baby bump wasn't as noticeable as Lina's, but it was enough that she couldn't wear her leather armor anymore. Still, eight empty sheaths hung around her... *Oh, crap!*

I looked around and saw daggers protruding from several objects including an old gob, who just went about his business like he didn't have a dagger in his skull. Damn, old gobs are no joke.

I stopped and stared at him while Reginauld went to help the man Nex was strangling. He looked over at me and bowed as blood squirted onto the ground in front of him.

"Uh, hello there. Um, are you feeling okay?"

He just nodded, causing another gush of blood to coat the people around him. "This was normal even before you got here. Actually, it's a bit quieter now, and believe it or not, she's actually an angel compared to her mother. Now that woman could throw a knife!"

"At least let me take that out for you."

"No, it'll be alright, I can look after myself."

"This isn't like a cold or something. It's a dagger...in your head..."

"It'll fall out when it's ready. I don't want to be a burden."

I stared at the old guy in disbelief as he picked up some smoked bear meat and firewood. He bowed again and walked away, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

I have a feeling I'm going to be bringing this gob back to life again later.

Nex was holding Reginauld at bay while she shook the meat guy.

I walked over to her, and her eyes snapped to me before she burst into tears. "I just wanted...but they didn't have...and I, I'm so sorry! I just...and he didn't have any!"

She broke down and sat on the ground crying. I scooped her into my arms, carried her around the corner away from prying eyes and sat her on my lap.

"It's okay, everyone knows that you're going through some changes, and this is your first pregnancy. I don't know much about it myself, but from the stories in my world, humans have nine months. Having to go through all that in three must be horrible."

She held onto me tightly, but she wouldn't meet my eyes. "I just didn't want you to see me like that. And now I'm crying in front of everyone. That's not who I am." She hic'd. "I'm the former chief's daughter and the current chief's mate. To be seen as weak or unreliable is just..."

I held her close while she sobbed against me. I found her so attractive right then, both for the fact that she was trusting me with her vulnerable side and that she was carrying our child. She was putting herself through this for us and for the sake of our baby.

"You may not look at it as being strong or reliable, but you're the strongest I've ever seen you. You're bringing a new life into this world, and these things you're going through are just a small part of that."

She stopped crying as I brushed a piece of her green hair from her face and kissed her. I wiped her tears and held her close for a while until I felt her body relax in my arms.

She tilted her head back, and I stared into her deep, honey-colored eyes until her lips formed a soft smile.

I smiled back down at her and her eyes lit up as she subconsciously activated life sense. She slowly licked her bottom lip, and I knew what that meant. We were now on the other side of her hormones.

And goblin customs being what they are...

Unlike Lina, there was no bargaining with Nex on this issue, and she was a little larger, so I only had to be careful about how deep I let it go.

While I was reasoning it out, she had already untied my pants and was positioning things. Of course I was already ready—the satyr side of me wouldn't refuse—and the way she was looking at me lit a fire inside me.

I inhaled as a warm feeling slid down my length and her muscles began their greedy milking motions around me.

I had to fight the urge to plunge the twins in deeper as we began slowly rocking. Nex moaned as I pulled her close and kissed her. I felt her juices dripping down my inner thighs, another side effect of her current condition. I reached under her loose shirt and gently squeezed her swollen breasts. She winced slightly, but after some time she began to moan again.

Nex's moaning had caused spectators to gather again. But neither of us cared. I could feel her muscles start to twitch and quicken their pace, and I knew she was close. I was, too, but it was maddening to be buried only two-thirds into her.

We kissed again, and as she finished she bit my bottom lip. The feeling of her orgasm drove me over the edge, and I emptied myself inside her as she rested her head on my shoulder. Her body relaxed in my lap and the milking motions slowly stopped as the ground under us turned to mud.

We stayed like that for a while as I held her and listened to her soft breath in my ear. I kissed her cheek and slowly laid her down, just like last time she was spent. She dazedly looked up at me and smiled contentedly before closing her eyes.

I sat there watching her for a while before I remembered the crowd.

This probably wasn't the best place for her to sleep.

I picked her up and carried her to my church. The gobs had ripped out a couple of the back rooms and made a straw bed large enough for me and all my mates to sleep in. I later used the grand curtains and draperies to make a sort of mattress out of the straw, with a matching quilt. I don't know why, but I'm still disturbed by my sewing skill. And the worst part of it is that I seem to enjoy it every now and then.

Of course we still all slept together, and the largeness of the bed made it comfortable for Liz as well. I still remember the night after I made the mattress, she almost cried. Crappy as it may be, it was the first time she'd ever slept on one. Of course, it was like that for all of them, but for Liz, I think it was momentous, finally having a bed of her own, rather than loose straw.

There were so many things that I once took for granted, simple things that I'd never been without. Whenever Liz tells me about her life, it reminds me of how hard this place can be.

If she were a human woman, back on earth, she could have stayed in a shelter, gotten a job, or at the very least gone to a hospital when she was injured. But not here. It wasn't just this world that was harsh, it was the people. That's one thing the two places have in common: People can be the worst part.

Not here, though. I can't say that my methods are beyond reproach, but in this town, everyone matters. We're not concerned about politics or power; we only try to help each other survive. At least for now. I tend to wonder if it's possible to have a large government in this world. If I ruled an entire kingdom, I'd have no idea what I was doing.

I laid Nex down and covered her up. She'd probably be asleep for the next few hours. I kissed her on the forehead and left the church again.

I saw Reginauld talking with the gob with a head wound. He pointed to something on the ground, and as the old guy looked down, Reginauld yanked the dagger free and dodged the gush of blood that followed.

The old guy sprang back up with a bug of some kind in his hand. He munched it happily and walked off.

It's always awkward to talk to Reginauld after Nex and I mate, but I waved to him and he nodded while wiping the blood off the dagger.

I couldn't help wondering if that's how the previous daggers and knives 'fell out' for the old guy. I mentally nicknamed him Headwound.

The day had already been eventful, but I decided to go check on Fura and our little farm. I had the idea to attempt to make a sort of domesticated animal after the meat from Fura's warren started to rot. Sure, we can eat rotten things just fine, but so can all the insects that live around here... And sure, we can eat the insects just fine, too, but dammit. Sometimes I just wanted a steak. I also wanted us to have a steady food source.

I used rodent souls and fleshcrafted a few smaller cows. I figured smaller animals would eat less while also having a higher birth rate. I made five of them, two females and three males. The females are good for milk as well as breeding, but the males are necessary to diversify the gene pool. Chalk that piece of knowledge up to falling asleep while watching the Discovery Channel, though I'm not sure if they were talking about cows or macaques.

Well, it doesn't really matter, after the females spit out a litter... Do cows have a litter? Hey, look at that litter of cows? Well, either way I'll be switching their genders after each batch of steaklets to see what yields more.

While lost in my thoughts I accidentally ran right into an older townswoman. She gasped as she hit the ground and her basket of roots scattered around her.

"You hit me!"

"What? I swear I didn't. I'm so sorry, I... Let me help you with those."

Her expression changed as she recognized me. "No! No, please don't do that. I couldn't possibly let Two-Dong John bother himself because of my mistake. Besides, you've already done enough."

"It's really no prob... Wait, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean you hit me, so I must have done something to displease you. I beg your forgiveness! Please don't turn me

into a flaming head like you did to my husband!" She shifted her gaze to the dirt and got on her knees.

"Woah! No. I just ran into you accidentally. I promise, there was nothing intentional about it."

"Please, Two-Dong! You can hit me again, just forgive me!"

"Get up, please. You're smashing the roots we take so much time to dig up."

I reached down and tried to help her up as she shrieked, "No, you're hurting me!"

A couple of gobs stopped their root harvesting and watched us.

I gently let her down, and I swear I could almost see a smile.

"I barely touched you."

Shit, now it really does look like I'm guilty. I slowly ran my hand down my face and breathed out a puff of fog. *This just isn't my day is it?*

I nodded to the woman who flinched at my gesture. What, did she think I shoot laser beams out of my eyes now or something? You can plan for most things, but crazy isn't one of them.

I walked away from her with a quickness. Maybe not all of my people understood me yet.

I ducked behind the makeshift storehouse, picked up a water gourd and absentmindedly drank from it. There are a lot of things that make me angry, but when people don't listen because they've already made up their mind on who I am, it's just infuriating!

My heartbeat rang out in my ears and the dark god seemed to stir. *My temper's coming out again. I need to relieve some of this anger. But at the same time, it would be bad if any more of my people saw me acting angry after what happened. I'll just talk to myself calmly, that usually works.*

I threw the water gourd on the ground. "I did not hit her... I did no—"

Bob's bearded boyfriend came walking around the corner. Bob had originally given him a strange name, but I told him to change it to something normal.

"Oh hi Mark!"

Did that just happen? I gazed off at the treeline. This was another thing I'd never be able to explain to anyone here. An awkward mood developed and several minutes passed, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything else. I wasn't mad anymore, but I didn't feel good, either.

"Okay, man, you're kinda freaking me out now. Sooo, I'm just going to go over there while you stay over here." He pointed to a cow pat that I was standing in and walked off.

Maybe I am nuts. Did I really hit that old lady? Did this exchange really just happen?

"Master, you're fine. You only bumped into her, and this conversation did happen. I heard it all, too."

Great, the voice in my head is comforting me.

"Thanks, Mors. I'm sorry I just called you a voice in my head."

"That's okay, I still... Never mind. Either way, you're not going crazy!"

"Did Bob somehow do this? This has him written all over it."

"It's possible; he absorbed the other him who used the past life spell. He's gained the knowledge of infinite lifetimes. But given his behavior, I believe he would probably use that knowledge to do just this."

Oh yeah, the past life spell. I still worried about using that on myself. Just like absorbing the souls inside me, I feared it would cost me my individuality. Worse yet, I may find out I was someone like Genghis Khan and suddenly have the urge to pillage the women and rape the fields.

"I think you have that backwards."

"Rape the fields and pillage the women?"

She chuckled. "Close enough. If I didn't know how smart you are, I might be tempted to call you an idiot sometimes."

"Trust me, regardless of intellect, I'm still an idiot."

"I don't know. This world was out to kill you and somehow you still managed to claim a part of it as your own. You've also made an army out of the lowest creatures on the food chain and defeated a full legion with them. When you beat those mages, it wasn't your might that won that battle. It was your wit."

"You helped me! Without your logic, I probably would have tried something stupid and pointless, only to have my ass handed to me a few seconds later. Not to mention that time you...helped me to recover."

She blushed and broke eye contact. "That was...necessary. I had to...maintain your spirit."

"So we could only do that again if it was absolutely required to keep me alive?"

"Y-es, I, I need to go now. I have something to do..."

She hastily curtsied and disappeared from my head.

I was thinking about what happened when she mended my spirit and even adding a few things that hadn't happened when I heard a stifled moan.

Yep, she's really working hard at something.

Even though I know she's a part of me, I can't help but remember those events vividly. She needs to be more confident. If she were flesh and blood, I would have her as a mate at almost any cost. But then again, she's me in a way. I suppose that's the linchpin. If she wasn't me and couldn't feel what I'm feeling and act in the best possible way, would it still have been as good? Yet if she wasn't me, would I actually be more attracted to her?

I heard a small yelp as I fantasized about tying her up and spanking her. I know I'm a pervert, but she likes it, so it's okay.

I thought about a gag and a stock and heard several small whimpers. I thought about putting it into her slowly

while she struggled and feeling her warm holes as I filled them.

A few muffled moans later, I knew she was satisfied. Too bad I couldn't actually feel any of that without being resurrected and going through hell.

Wait a minute, what happens if I'm resurrected again?

A sweat-drenched Mors appeared before me in nothing more than her lingerie. She pulled the gag from her mouth and let out several hot breaths.

"That...would be bad." She took a moment to catch her breath.

"What exactly were you doing?"

She seemed to notice her state and her dress magically appeared on her. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with. But no, please don't risk that again! I don't think I could save you a second time!"

I took a few moments to look her over. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was still breathing hard. There's no doubt she saw my thoughts, and I had no doubt what she was doing.

"Don't worry, I have no intention of being hit by another resurrection. If only there was another way we could be together."

"W-well, I suppose if you think about me before you fall asleep, then maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

She started breathing heavily again. "This is the part where you make me say everything, isn't it!?"

I think I broke Mors. Wait a minute, if she's like this then does that meant I'm secretly a—

"Yes, everybody has both." A wooden X appeared behind her with leather bindings for hands and feet.

"I...can't."

She began panting again. "I'm you, there's no judgement with me. I'll make you feel things you've never dreamed of."

I once again thought of our time before, the way she felt, how she acted. She was so soft and yielding. The perfect M to my S. Was that because she was my other half, literally?

"Yes, I am you. I want what you want; every time you mate, I mate too."

My world froze for a moment. She mates too? Did that mean I'm getting her off every time I get off?

"Yes!"

"Why didn't you tell me!?"

"Because I didn't want you to think badly of me."

"Then earlier with Nex?"

"Yes, Master! I came!"

"So are you into, you know, girls?"

"Of course. Will you be taking on any more mates?"

"I don't know, honestly. I feel like I have enough as it is, and each of them means something to me. I wouldn't want to sacrifice any time with them for someone new."

"That's fair, but what about Threscia?"

My body went stiff. I knew that Threscia was my most devout follower and that she harbored feelings for me, but at the same time, she still hadn't recovered from what Thads had done to her. She was broken, and I couldn't bring myself to think of her as a sexual being while she was still healing. Each time I thought of her, my anger grew and my thoughts turned to the bastard that got away. The one who tortured my daughters and ordered my people to be obliterated. A priest of Theresa.

The gears in my mind switched to a state of rage. *I want to see him burn! I would give my life for his suffering! How can one so cruel walk free? If only he were here, if only I would have noticed what he was sooner!*

"Master! Please stop, I didn't intend to anger you. Have you considered that you may heal Threscia by taking her as a mate?"

"With what, the magic power of my twins? Women aren't so simple. Even if nothing traumatic had ever happened to

her, I still wouldn't take her. She's a girl at heart, and she was meant for someone pure. Someone who isn't me."

"But she's given herself to you entirely. She knew what that entailed and still did it. She's crying out for you, but you won't listen. Dismissing someone for what they've been through isn't the right thing to do in my opinion. You're not giving her a chance because she's damaged, and I think you're hurting her more that way. She lived here with me, inside you. I probably know more about her than anyone else. You're ignoring her, and she's acting out because of it. She hates that she's treated differently."

"I'm sorry, but I can't believe it. She's modified herself extensively. Why would she do that if she's not trying to get away from being treated sexually? She's a smart girl, I trust she would know the effects of looking and acting the way she does."

"She's a 19-year-old girl in a backwards world. You think she's trying to get away from you, but I think she's struggling for your attention. The next time she bathes, look at her body. I bet she kept certain areas flesh, only for you."

"Why...why would she do that? It's so one-sided. None of it benefits her. If she keeps going, she'll never find a mate looking that way."

"Because she knows what's inside of you. She knows you'll accept her regardless of her appearance. And because you're the sort of man who actually appreciates it. I think she roared in anger earlier not because your finger was stolen but because she didn't get it. A part of you belonged to someone else. It was taken without your consent, and I think that drove her over the edge. I'm not saying she's perfect, but I am saying she's dedicated herself to you, body, mind, and soul. That's more than you could ever ask for. And the cost is only your dignity from time to time."

"Mors, are you jealous of her?"

"Of course. I started at the top. She worked her way up inside of you. She forced other souls to acknowledge her,

until she stood as my equal. She worked hard while no one was watching, just for the chance to impress you. I respect her, and it tears me apart when you ignore her."

I thought about embracing Mors, and I could almost feel her marshmallowy body pressing against me.

"Master..." She closed her eyes and I felt her face pressed against my neck. Though she was fairy-sized, I still wanted her to feel like a real woman.

As I held her I pulled forth every emotion she invoked. My appreciation, my gratitude, and my complete faith in her. I trusted her more than I had ever trusted anyone. I wanted her to feel that, and even though I didn't love myself, I still loved her. She was the best part of me, and no matter what I did I could never replace her.

At first she didn't seem to have emotion. But I knew better. She was inside me, and even though she was originally made of me and an amalgamation of supportive souls, she still had feelings of her own. I'd gotten very familiar with who she was, and I knew with the entirety of my mind what she meant to me. She was my perfect equal—literally my other half. I would endure any pain and keep myself from dying just to save her.

She looked up at me with sad eyes. "Why? If I were made to serve any of the souls inside you, their ego would drive me to hate them. But you... You make me want to give myself to you every time. I don't ask for it, but you force it out of me, why do you—"

I kissed her, fun-sized though she may be. I couldn't kiss her like normal; it was more her forehead to the back of her head.

Her small eyes started to moisten.

"Come on Mors, you know I don't want that."

"You killed two men today, and countless before them. By all normal thought, I should hate you, but when you do things like this... I just can't see you as an evil person."

"No one is actually evil; most people are a blend of black and white. The men today were trying to kill children. I couldn't forgive them, so I took their lives and exacted some suffering. Later I will feed them to you. Even I know they don't deserve to burn forever. But the others... The number of girls they raped and murdered... I don't have it in me to forgive them. The only reason I would ever bring them back is to kill them again."

"Sometimes I think you overreact. But when I read their memories before you turned them into torches, there wasn't even the slightest shred of remorse. This world is suffering, and a crybaby like you might just bring it some comfort before it dies."

I smiled down at her. "A crybaby, huh?"

She snickered. "It's true, though. Of the two of us, only I know where those tears come from."

"Are they mine? Please! Tell me."

"All you need to know is that they come at the cost of others' suffering. The reactions are yours alone."

"That's not enough of an explanation. Fill in the rest."

"I'm sorry, Master, but I can't. I don't know everything yet. I only have a theory. When I was mending you, the darkness grew. I was worried that without you around, it would start consuming everything but it waited patiently, and in your soul I saw it stirring. A pool formed around you, and you sank. At first it scared me, and I tried to follow you, but when I touched that liquid I was overcome by sadness. It was like an endless well of loneliness, hatred, and immense remorse. But it enveloped you like a mother's womb, and when you came back out you were whole again."

Shivers ran down my spine, but at the same time I felt something new from the darkness: warmth. And somehow that scared me most of all.

"I'm sorry, Master, I didn't mean to make things worse."

"It's okay, Mors. Thank you."

I released her, and she hovered there in front of me with a faint smile for a few moments before disappearing.

I opened my eyes to see Mark standing across the field from me, giving me a one-eyebrow-raised stare.

"You know I was kidding when I told you to stay there, right? You can totally leave. In fact, why don't you give that a try?"

I flipped Mark off and he returned the favor.

I gave myself a light slap to wake up from the stupor I had fallen into and headed towards Fura.

Chapter 4

I found her supervising a small group of humans and gobs as they planted different leafy things. It was thanks to her that we had found a sort of fleshy root that grew in this area. She could feel the presence of plants and even control them a bit. But she never forced something to bloom or grow too quickly.

I remembered her fog in the forest right after I changed her into a flesh-and-blood person and the effect it had on the grass. She told me that it consumes too much mana and that if she accelerated plant growth too much, it would exhaust the nutrients in the soil, depleting it so nothing could grow there until it recovered.

I didn't grow up in the country. I didn't farm or hunt or fish, at least not regularly. When I was a kid, sometimes my dad would take me fishing, but I mostly remember being bored while he got drunk. Of course, it was time spent together, and it was fun to get to know him better.

I wonder if I should take Athan fishing? I made him my son, so I should make time for him. I really am a crappy father. No wonder he's got all this angst now. Instead of 'Go clean your room,' I'm all like, 'Go kill that guy.' And a month is like half a year in a goblin's mental development.

As I approached, Fura took a break from yelling at her farmers and smiled at me. I wrapped her in a hug and she pressed her body against me. I guess old dryad habits die hard.

I smiled at her as she leaned in, and we shared a deep kiss.

"You don't have to seduce me anymore, you know. I'm already yours," I quipped.

"Trust me, I know." She went back in for another kiss, and this time it was slower and with obvious intent. The twins responded and pressed against her.

"Now you can accuse me of seducing you," she said in Forrestkin as she smiled victoriously at me.

I cleared my throat. "So, how are the crops and cows doing?"

"They are fine! We've been switching out the dead ones for some that can use what they've left, for lack of a better explanation. The world of plants is a brutal one. They constantly battle for nutrients and sunlight. Their whole life is spent fighting."

"Well, that's a new way to think about it."

"It is the only way. Fight, my brothers and sisters, and you shall live!"

It was refreshing to see Fura passionate about something for a change. After everything that happened, she finally settled in here and found something she was good at. More still, people appreciated her efforts; she was a big reason they weren't starving anymore. Between her, the human fishermen, and the goblin hunters, everything had come together nicely. But we were still rationing. There aren't any quick fixes for the famine this place had been through.

"Oh, wait here a moment, John, there is a man who has an idea for you."

She yelled, "Paul!"

Two heads sprang up and looked at her expectantly.

"Ack, not you, Pauls!"

They both gave her a deadpan expression.

"Damn, this English. Richards!"

Two more men sprung up.

"No, not the Richards. Uh, how do I say. Pauru Richards."

A gob inexplicably wearing a nice suit casually strolled up to us.

I could tell by his looks and the fact that he had hair that he was one of ours, but who the hell was he, and what was

with the suit?

"Okay, Pauru, how'd you get the suit, and what do you have for me?"

He bowed almost gracefully. "I'm an egg hunter. My clan used to find eggs to raise into tasty meats when things were easier. The old chief gave me this honorable garb after cleaning out his house. He said my clan would be useful again soon and I should look important."

"I see. Then what about the name?"

He removed his suit coat and pointed to a sewn-in tag. "I was told that's what these symbols here said, so I felt it was meant to be my name."

I looked at it with astonishment. The writing was English. It read Paul William Jonathan Richards III. And right below that in Therossian it said Pauru Cicero. Whoever read this to him had to have had a poor understanding of both languages.

When I converted the humans here and gave them all abilities, I'd also had Mors give them English so that there wouldn't be any language barriers between them and my goblins. Then that little rebellion happened, and Lil'sis marched the zombified perpetrators down the street.

In a show of obedience to me and my goblins, several of the remaining humans changed their names to their English equivalents. Of course I hadn't requested that and held nothing against the ones who wanted to keep their original names, but could this suit have been made by a converted human? Or is there another being from my world here somewhere? I added it to my mental list, another thing to investigate later. *Today really is turning into a day of questions.*

I handed the suit jacket back to him. "That is quite the item you have there. Make sure not to wear it all the time. Try to only wear it when you're not working."

He took it reverently and put it back on. "Yes, God John. Oh, about my idea! Eggs! You should make birds to eat. I

know how to help them hatch, though I've only heard stories. My clan did it once. I know I can do it!"

Yep, I'd made cows because I wanted steak, but looking back, chickens would have been a better animal. They could eat the abundant insects in the area, and we could harvest their eggs.

Let's see, eggs. I would need a fair amount of calcium, sulphur and protein.

I sent out the pheromone to Fernando and waited. He was never too far from me, except when he was hunting. And to my surprise he was good at it. He'd started to put the mimic ability to full use and could make himself appear like a grouping of rocks, or even a section of trees. It was too bad that he's the only one who can eat the things he kills, or I could use him to gather food for the whole village.

"Very well, Pauru, in a few moments I'll present you with two eggs. This will be your first test. If you can hatch them, don't eat them, instead place the birds in an enclosure and feed them insects. If you do this right, then you may have more eggs in the future."

"Yes, this sounds like the stories I've heard! I will prove to you and the rest that it can be done."

I fought the urge to tell him that it was a common practice where I came from and probably even here, as there were wooden chicken coops just a few feet away from where we were standing. I didn't want to steal his thunder.

I heard the standard screams and yelps as Fernando skittered towards me. His exoskeleton resembled the brown rocks in the area, and his mandibles were still working on something furry.

He came to a stop in front of me and rolled over, almost knocking Pauru over. I rubbed his stomach.

"Who's a good boy, who's a good boy?"

He chittered and released a pheromone. "I'm a good boy!"

After a while he rolled back over, and I noticed everyone looking at us in different levels of shock.

Ah, I guess they probably don't have pets or something.

I gathered what I needed from his reserve, and with Mors' help I crafted two chicken eggs.

I handed them to Pauru and he jogged off excitedly. I didn't dare wonder how he intended to incubate them, but given other goblin customs, I was betting it involved poo.

I spent the next few hours with Fura. She told me she was planning to grow berries, something resembling cabbage, and more edible roots. They were the only things still left around here, so we didn't have much choice, but she told me they feed each other nutrients, so everything would work out somehow.

On the way back, I noticed Languoria and Liz teaching the children, human and goblin alike, their letters. I watched for a while, but then the thought of Liz in glasses being an awkward school teacher caused my mind to drift, and I had to leave before I dragged her off.

As I approached the center of town, the sounds of grunting and wooden poles clashing filled my ears. It had been a while since I had managed to escape the church, so I decided to sit in on Red's training.

It looked like the more experienced men were sparring while the younger ones did physical drills. Red marched among them, checking on each and showing them proper form. Of course he was holding a log, while they only had branches. It must have been tough for them. But that fear they felt there would prepare them for the future. I wished they could live in peace, but somehow I doubted that'd ever be an option, at least not in their lifetimes.

Reginauld eventually showed up and began to lead the younger ones in drills. There may always be a bit of prejudice between the older humans and goblins, but these kids were learning and sweating together. Someday I hope that they come to understand each other more than those

before them. Regardless of who these people were before, they're all my people now, and none of them will ever be the same as the rest of their kind again.

"Chief!" Reginald shouted. "Would you care to join us?"

I smiled and went to him.

"Now, what do we do when your chief is present?"

Everyone bowed and shouted, "Chief!"

Well, I don't feel put on the spot at all. What am I supposed to do here, bow and yell at everyone?

I hastily bowed. "Yeah..."

Reginald tilted his head and gave me a puzzled look.

Well, I'd work on that.

"All right, Chief, how about some light sparring?"

I nodded, and he brought out a familiar young gob girl with a green ponytail. Nex's sister. Then it was my turn to give him a puzzled look.

"Don't let looks fool you, I've been training her since she could walk. She also has everything you gave her. Just don't be too rough on her if you would, sir."

I nodded again. I didn't know where he was going with this, but I didn't like the idea of fighting a little girl.

"Some rules before you both start. John, you'll be defending," he chirped. "And you'll be attacking. If you score one good hit on John, then I'll declare you the winner."

He threw her a wooden pole.

It might not seem like it, but this may actually be a challenge. She has everything I do barring Galvanism, and at her size, her speed could possibly overwhelm me. I'm also not the best at defending. I mainly just mend myself afterwards.

He held his hand in the air and dropped it into a fist. "Start!"

She took off in a sprint so fast I could hardly perceive it and...tripped on a rock, sliding several feet on her face in the dirt.

I heard a few laughs from the others who were watching as she sat up with snot coming out of her nose and tears forming in her eyes.

"Oh, oh god, are you alright?"

She hic'd and snorted the snot back in. "Yeah."

I ran over to her and knelt down. "You don't have to do this, here I'll mend y—"

She raised her pole right between my legs and the crowd let out an array of pained noises. My eyes bulged as I quickly switched to undead mode.

Super strength, check; wooden pole in the crotch, check. Yep, this sucks.

"Mors, did she burst...anything?"

"Y-yes master..."

I took several deep breaths, even though they did nothing for me when my heart wasn't beating. I immediately began mending the goolies.

She smiled up a Reginauld, who stood as still as a statue, dead to all the world. "Did I win? I did, didn't I? Papa, I won, right?"

He turned from green to white as he robotically turned towards me and tossed me the dagger he reclaimed earlier.

"Kill me! You must, sir!"

I grunted back at him. "I would never do that to you."

"No! Don't hurt Papa!"

He knelt down on the ground and hung his head. "You must, for your honor! Just do it quickly."

She began crying as large tears streaked down her face.

"Kid, please. There's no way I'm going to hurt him. He's a good man and a friend."

"Then I take it you want me to do it." He lunged for the dagger and I kicked it out of the way.

I began breathing fog. *This is too much! Today has been one strange hell after another. I'm done!*

I stood and toggled on life sense, soul steal and dark shroud. "Behold, little one, you have not won, as Two-Dong

John has balls of steel! That wasn't a direct hit, it was a block!"

Gape-mouthed stares turned into an eruption of cheers as Reginauld regained his normal color and began softly laughing to himself.

"Of course... I see. Steel is it? You're saying you blocked it...like that?" He took a few moments to recover and stood. "I'll allow it."

The match continued for only a few minutes before he called a stop and declared me the victor. Luckily she didn't score anymore hits, but it was obvious where she was aiming. Maybe she was mad at me for taking her sister away.

She looked up at me as her eyes began to mist over again. *Great, now I feel like a bully.*

"Little one, for your bravery, I shall grant you a request. Is there anything you want?"

She seemed to think it over for a while. "Yeah! I want a baby, like sis is having!"

"Very well! I shall give you one in three days' time!"

Reginauld picked up the dagger and came towards me. This time I could guess that it wasn't for himself.

I whispered when he was near enough, "Relax, I'm just going to make her a doll."

He tilted his head again. "Doll?"

"Yeah, a little person made of fabric."

"A little... Why would one need such a thing?"

"It's so she can pretend to be a mother. It's a popular thing from my world. Trust me, she'll like it."

He blew the dust off the dagger and handed it to me. "Very well, Chief. I'm sorry about what happened there. I did tell her that was a man's vulnerable area, but I never expected her to use it on you."

"That's okay, if I have any more daughters I hope you teach that to them, as well."

He nodded, and I could see the sweat dripping from his brow. He'd had a rough day, too.

"Maybe you were right about me staying in the church."

"Not at all. Seeing you among your people has been an inspiration. Everyone worked harder knowing that you were watching them and taking an interest in what they were doing. I've also set up a town meeting for tomorrow evening in the church. And again, please excuse my daughter and my unbecoming behavior earlier. As Nex gets closer, I'm reminded more and more of her mother."

He looked off as a deep frown etched its way into his normally friendly face.

"What was she like?"

"She was a strict gob, especially on Nex and me, and a fierce warrior, but she laughed harder than anyone." He put his arm around his daughter and looked down at her. "It's a shame she'll never have to go through her training. That's what I was hoping your sparring session could do. If there's no fear when learning to fight, then when the real fighting starts she'll panic."

"So you wanted me to?"

"I was hoping you'd scare her. But now you're going to make her a doll. You, Red, and I all seem to baby these kids."

"We may as well while we have the time. If mercs showed up here, then that means Evergreen spilled the beans on us. Even if Therograd has no army, it doesn't mean that some group of fools won't show up trying to slay some monsters for coin or honor."

"You shouldn't call our people monsters."

"It's not me, it's how we'll be viewed. Earlier today there was a human woman. Apparently I made an example out of her husband. I'm not looking for forgiveness, but she was carrying a basket of roots through a town that less than a month ago was starving. Regardless of what we accomplish, to humans we'll always be the bad guys. So we shouldn't

deny being monsters; we should embrace it and use it to our advantage. They won't expect us to take mercy on them, or relent, or care if our loved ones die. They'll think of us as slaving beasts and attack head on... We need a banner! Something to unite us and show our enemies that we are what they fear."

"A banner denotes intelligence, is that not the opposite of what you're trying to accomplish? They'll raise their opinion of us from monsters to something more like orcs. They have banners."

That's right, I forgot that Reginauld grew up hearing the stories of other races.

"What happened to the orcs?"

"They simply vanished! And months later the humans broke ties and began hunting us." His brows wrinkled, and he paused to think. "I saw one warparty when I was barely old enough to hunt. There were five of them, and they all looked starved and beaten. I ran, of course, and told anyone with ears, but no one in the village believed me. Later that night I couldn't sleep. It was as if something was watching me. Perhaps there are more things like the dryad's mother out there. Things that remain hidden and pick their targets wisely."

What kind of thing out there could wipe out orcs? From what I remembered, they rode wargs, which meant that at one point they had to have been powerful enough to capture and breed sha'dwargs. But if what Reginauld said was true, then something had worn them down to nothing.

I rubbed my head and gradually ran my hand down my face. "Well, Reginauld, I think I've had enough for today."

He bowed to me as I went to the church. Lina greeted me at the doors, and I scooped her up as I entered.

It was still early, and most of the town was still training or learning, but I was tired. Not physically, but mentally, I was drained.

Nex was still sleeping softly with her arms around a pillow. I lay next to her with Lina on my chest and pulled Nex close. She moaned and nuzzled her nose against me before falling back asleep. I looked down at Lina, who blushed in return. I wiped the hair from her face and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Are you tired?" I asked.

She smiled up at me and nodded before moving up and kissing me. She stood for a moment and wrapped herself in her wings before stretching out on her back on top of me. I ran my hand under her wings and caressed her stomach. Her hands met mine and she let out a long yawn.

I guess today wasn't easy for her either.

As I rubbed her, I could make out the hard shape of her egg. I guessed it wouldn't be long now.

She slowly pushed my hands lower and lower until I felt a wet spot.

I slowly moved her clothes out of the way and ran my fingers up and down her lips. Her body shivered, and she let out a light moan. I gently pressed my finger inside and slowly moved it in and out, getting it wet. I moved it up and began tracing small circles around her maidenhead as she began moving her hips. I switched to rubbing her up and down as her breath turned to panting. She began to shake, and I knew she was getting close, but she stopped me.

She breathed out hot smoke as she turned her head back to face me and whispered, "It's no fun doing it alone. I want to feel you inside as I come."

"We can't, I've already told you."

"It's okay, just use my ass."

At this point the twins were now in charge. I reached down and let them free as she slid down, and I could feel her hot wetness pressed against me. She sat up and straddled one of them between her powerful thighs and ran herself along it. I watched as her ass moved back and forth along my length before licking a finger and pressing it into

her waiting hole. She stopped only for a moment as her body got hotter. My finger felt like it was melting, and I couldn't wait any longer.

I pushed her up onto her knees, and she positioned herself as she slowly allowed me to enter her ass. There was a huge resistance and a stifled scream as she shifted more and more of her weight on my top shaft. I could feel her muscles gradually relax as more and more of me entered her until I felt something hard.

"Lina, stop!" I whispered.

She didn't listen. Between her lust and her endorphins, she was in a trance. I pulled her back onto my stomach and held her there. I was still buried in her ass but only about a third of the way. She straightened her legs out and began to rock her hips making small motions, pushing me in and pulling me out. I held her close and watched her. Her mouth was open and her eyes were closed as her face flushed deep crimson.

I positioned my other one at her entrance but stopped, hesitating there. I couldn't go in that far. Her egg was only a few inches away.

She spread her legs and grabbed it with her talons, forcing it in. I pulled against her, but it was too late, my head was inside.

I marveled for a minute at her warmth as I moaned.

She caught her breath enough to speak. "It's okay, I'll hold it. You don't know how badly I've wanted this, even more since you've been denying me."

I moved my hand and her talons came to rest at my base. As she moved her legs back and forth, her talons clutched tighter, stroking and strangling me as my head softly rubbed into her. She began to shake again as her legs started to stiffen. I could feel my toes curling as she started to orgasm.

She began to moan now, loud enough that Nex stirred and said something in her sleep as I reached my peak and

started to fill her. Lina froze, and we both lay there twitching together. Her talons pulled me free, and my seed covered her stomach as the rest shot into her. We lay there for a while before I pulled her higher, freeing my other twin with a slight pop. She clenched her legs like she always does afterwards to keep everything inside. One day I may tell her that after she falls asleep it all comes out anyway, but it's too cute. Everything about her is cute.

Later Leera, Liz and Fura came in. I mated with them all before the night was done.

I let my mind wander for a while before sleep took me.

Chapter 5

I spent most of today cuddled up with Lina while I made a banner. It seemed that after last night she was getting closer. I was starting to get excited about having a baby with her. Sometimes when we're cuddling I had to fight the urge to use fleshcrafting to determine the gender, but I wouldn't want to rob her of the surprise.

The town meeting revealed several problems, chief of which was the prejudice that still ran rampant.

I had Reginauld tell the gobs to show up a little late so I could eavesdrop for a while.

I borrowed an old robe that I found in the basement and fleshcrafted myself to appear elderly. I knew fully that this was a small town and everybody knew everybody, so I stayed in the back.

I quickly found through hushed whispers that we're still viewed as monsters. Somehow, they still think they're above us. Yet they were the ones who stooped to monstrous acts. I'd long been disillusioned by humanity, even before I got here, and now I could feel myself once again losing all hope for it.

I listened for a while, and to my surprise there were those who understood what we were trying to do here. They were the builders who worked with Red, the farmers who worked with Fura, and the hunters and fishermen who could now ply their trades with goblin escorts. In other words, everyone who mattered.

Those who hadn't had to work and hadn't socialized still didn't understand. Some even refused to let their children attend the school that Liz and Languoria set up, which I found ironic considering it was me who brought some of those children back after they killed them. So what were

they trying to protect here? Nothing but archaic notions of superiority.

I noticed the woman from earlier who tried to make a scene when I bumped into her and focused in on her conversation.

"After what happened to me yesterday, I just don't feel safe letting my children play with those little green snots. Who knows what kind of vile ideas they may try to poison them with?"

"Oh, I know, after what he did to us... We didn't deserve that! He's sick, and they worship him!"

"Don't you worry, as soon as I can, I'm going to send a message to Therograd! Then we can be free of these monsters."

"Didn't you already try that?"

"I did, but I didn't have a way to send it there. My husband, Theresa bless his soul, has a brother in Evergreen. That was as far as I could make it without getting caught."

"Did the money we raised help?"

"Yes, dear, you helped a lot. He knows we don't have much, but he said he'd take care of it."

"Hopefully they'll send some Paladins; that'll show this demon. He wouldn't last a minute against a chosen of Theresa."

They refused to acknowledge what they'd done, all while they looked upon me as a tyrant and my gobs as abominations.

I hated people like this. They're weak, so they plot to turn others against you, hoping that someone else will get rid of you. At least goblins are direct; if they have a problem they'll let you know, usually with a fist, sometimes with a pie.

But now I knew it wasn't just the village head in Evergreen, it was the people here. I guessed that the three mercs' attack was at least partially their fault.

"Of course he wouldn't; he's a beast, nothing more. Oh! You wouldn't believe what happened earlier today!"

"What? Tell me!"

"One of those gross little green kids knocked on my door. It wanted Landrous to come out and play with him!"

"You must be kidding! How could he possibly think Landrous would dare to associate with some snotskin?"

"I'm not sure, but I invited him in."

"Eww, whatever for?"

"No, just wait now. I lit a fire and gave him a sweet roll."

The younger woman began laughing. "Have you gone mad!?"

"...Monkshood"

They both released hushed laughter.

"You had me going there, what happened?"

"I never found out. He left, and I had to get ready."

"Mors, what's monkshood?" I asked.

"You won't like this Master."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

"Just tell me."

"Monkshood is another name for wolfsbane. It's a poison."

"They she tried to poison him!"

"Yes, but goblins have a fairly unique digestion that they've evolved from eating many non-edible things. Not to mention that everyone now has modified stomachs. But if she used the roots, then he may die."

I quietly made my way outside and hurried to Healer's place.

There I found the child, dead in his parent's arms. His mother, a centaur gob from Nex's group, and his father, a burly gob, were weeping openly.

Healer sat in the corner with a vacant stare, his eyes red from tears shed until none would flow while Leera sat with the parents.

I shed my robe and returned to my normal form as I approached.

"May I?"

All the father managed was a pained sob as he slowly held his son out to me. I mended the damages, used blend, and infused his soul back into his body.

The child opened his eyes in confusion, but after he saw his parent's sad faces he began crying with them.

I bowed to them and made my way back to the church.

There's something strange happening again. Some hidden will seems to be targeting the children. I've noticed these patterns before. This world itself has something rotten in it.

I snuck in through the cellar door.

I can't get to the bottom of it now. But that woman may well be a part of it. Either way, she needs retribution in the worst way. I would kill her, make her a torch, but those are everywhere, and she still did what she did. Sometimes there are those whose ego trumps even their fear of death. I'll kill her ego and take away everything she cares about.

I grabbed my banner. All in time.

When it was time to start the meeting, I emerged from behind the throne and revealed my banner. It was a severed head with green flames spitting from its eyes and two macuahuitl. I'd chosen to use some of the black fabric from the bolt Ralphus had given me, and some white, green, and red thread, along with some paint I'd had Fura make from plants.

There were gasps from the stay-at-home group as expected. A banner meant that we were unified. It meant that I was marking them, making them subjects rather than prisoners. In other words, it stole their deniability. Now if some army came down on us they would be treated like, and killed with, the rest.

There's more than one kind of rebellion. The obvious one had been snuffed out, but the secret one still raged on in

their hearts: that grating rot that is racial superiority. I detest delusions, and these delusions in particular. Mentally and emotionally, they were born from weakness and the need to feel superior to someone else, even if you were in the same boat or worse off.

It was a mistake to let them remain human. To let them keep their guises and their race. No, today, I'd change them, and tonight there wouldn't be a human among us.

I called Reginauld up and told him to discreetly bar the doors as I handed my banner to one of Athan's men and sat in my throne.

Reginauld had done his job well; my mates and the children were not here. Blue also opted to stay buried in his forge. He was never light on work, and I'd only see him when it was time to report. But Red stood by the double doors wearing a stern expression.

I used coercion to give Fernando the command to knock on the floor twice. The room went silent.

"Thank you all for gathering here today. As many of you know, yesterday I walked through our town and watched as each of you went about your day. I was pleased to see both goblins and humans working hand in hand, but there were some of you I didn't see. So I thought now would be a good time to talk about the problems we're all facing and make concrete plans to solve them. We'll use a vote for any issue brought up and a vote for any solution proposed, but I still retain the right to veto anything." I cleared my throat. "Now, onto the first order of business, the food shortage."

The rest of the town meeting went as normal, with good ideas being brought up on both sides.

Then the end came, and when the doors didn't open, the whispers started.

I had Fernando stomp on the floor again as I stood.

"We've now spoken about the issues that face us all, but I can tell there's still a divide. If this was a time of peace, and if we were in another world, then I would work slowly toward

an understanding. But as things stand, this town's very survival and the survival of those that come after us hinges on our cooperation. Apparently there are those who believe they are subjugated, and to an extent they are right. I don't let you eat your children anymore! I fill your stomachs with meat and vegetables that we all gathered together. I protect you from predators and provide you with a place to live peacefully, though many don't deserve it. I've already changed each and every one of you, given you strength, power, and cured you of your illnesses. But spite is all some show for it. There are snakes hidden among you: people who still look down on others for no reason other than what they were born as. So, let's change that."

The confusion turned to chaos for a moment as what I said set in. Some screamed, some tried to run for the doors, only to be stopped by my men and set back in their places.

Cattle still, they're just livestock, content to chew their cud and be slaughtered. But that changes now.

"I'll start with volunteers."

Amidst the ruckus a man's voice shouted out. "I'll do it!"

He wore furs and had the looks of a man who fought for his meals. A hunter. The room quieted down as he stood in front of me and lowered his head.

"Worry not, you've already become a flesh construct, so this won't hurt unless I want it to. Now, any preferences? The only limit is size, and you can't remain human."

The man looked back at Red and sighed. "Well, I did want to be like him, but I'm guessing that's a no go now, huh?"

"Sorry, but if I did that then I'd run out of flesh soon."

He ran his hand over his beard several times and furrowed his brow. "Then I'd like to be something that would help me hunt."

I smiled down at him. I like it when people ask for something that isn't selfish. This way he can bring back more game and help our food situation.

"Very well, I'll use my judgement here."

I thought for a while and remembered the time I had the head of a sha'dwarg. True, I still retained the abilities, but without all the hardware they weren't as good.

I'll make him a wolf-man. His hearing and sense of smell may even surpass mine afterwards. I'll keep the abilities his eyes have; seeing with limited color isn't fun.

I fused one hand to him and one to Fernando.

"Alright, Mors, let's make a wolf-man."

"Yes, Master."

A few minutes later he opened his eyes, and I examined my work.

He now stood a few inches taller. I'd kept the browns and grays of his hair color to make his fur. He had long, impressive ears that ended in points, a long muzzle, and a row of sharp teeth.

He looked down at his hands which now had claws, then felt his face before inhaling and twitching his ears.

"I'll need to get used to this, but yes, I think it'll be helpful." He shot me a sharp-toothed grin as he walked to the back of the room.

A human whispered something to him and he released a low growl that made even the hair on my neck stand up. I still had some sha'dwarg-related trauma. *Yep, looks like he's enjoying himself, that's good.*

Other hunters and trappers had similar requests after seeing him, with the exception of some who worried that having claws may impede their ability to shoot an arrow. For them I opted for a toned-down version. There was even one man who wanted the features of a bird of prey. Sound logic, but Mors and I had difficulty with the eyes, having never fleshcrafted one. We tried our best to amplify the vision with the knowledge from Mors's souls and my knowledge from my previous world, but the results were mixed.

He could see with enhanced clarity, but he also saw colors that weren't there. From his description, it was almost like life sense was stuck halfway on. I told him he could try it

out for a while and I would change him to something else if he wanted.

Fleshcrafting Level Up!

Fleshcrafting Level 9

Personal fleshcrafting is now instantaneous. You may now fleshcraft multiple targets at a distance, though only at the rate of fleshcrafting level 3.

"Thank you, Mors!"

So, I'm now hitting the upper ranks of what it is to be a Flesh Golem. What do I do when it hits ten? It's not like I can unlock a new race, though I guess I can be pretty much any race.

I've often thought about how fun it would be to fly, but—

"Um, sir, I think it's my turn."

"Oh yeah, sorry about that."

Ah, Mario, for some reason I'd thought he was part of the rebellion we had earlier, but maybe that was someone else with a mustache. Hard to tell after what Lil'sis did to them.

"I don't hunt or anythin', so I was thinking, how about a bear?"

"Wow, that's an interesting choice. Forgive me for asking, but what do you do?"

"Carpentry, but lately I've been helping to build new buildings. I think the strength and climbing would come in handy."

"Well, I can't make too many bear-men, given what I have stored. Maybe just you and one other."

I made him larger, almost my height, and added thick layers of muscle. I used this world's bear as a template and gave him all of their features, including the grotesque tusks and smashed-in nose. I also managed to maintain his mustache. Facial hair is important damnit! Though I didn't currently have any, there was a time when I had a mighty beard.

He felt his face and smiled at me, or at least I think that's what it was.

"Thank you, sir!" he growled roughly.

Several other construction workers wanted the same, so I gave them a slender version. They should still be able to climb with those claws and jump high with those legs, so they were fine with it.

The fishermen had some whimsical ideas. It turned out that they had a perfectly logical fear of drowning or being stranded if a flood happened. I had personally witnessed the strong current of the rivers in the area after a rainstorm. And during my travels here, there were times we had to make a detour to find a place where the waters were calmer or the river was narrow enough to cross.

I gave them gills and scales, but I kept their faces human in structure. I had no intention of making a race of fish-faces. Besides, they'd always look surprised and it would be hard to carry on a conversation with them without laughing.

Now for the hard part. The women. Men were usually fine with becoming different as long as it meant gaining something, but I doubt the ladies approved of what they'd seen.

"Women of Riverbrook, I have something slightly different in mind for you. I will also change any features you may despise about yourself. It doesn't matter what it is, you may even whisper it to me. But I want you to know I will still make you beautiful. Maybe even more so than you currently are, and you will be strong! As a result of that I expect you all to work to make this town better! You have to participate, even if it's just a few days a week, be it teaching, hunting, farming, or construction. I expect to see each of you helping out."

As I feared, I only had one extremely nervous volunteer. It was Wendy's mom. I would have applauded her, but from her backwards glances I could tell she was bullied into it. She was like some timid creature. Looking back, I remembered she'd committed suicide.

She had fresh bruises around her arms, and on her neck, as well as across her cheek. What was her job here? With a frail body and pale skin, I couldn't imagine her working the fields. How was it that she took care of Wendy?

I tried to look her in the eyes, but each time she averted her gaze.

"I'm sorry, but I never got your name."

She blushed. "A-Adria. Thank you again for taking care of my...our daughter."

I could tell, and not just because she had once been a soul inside me, that she had lived her whole life helplessly, be it bullied by women or used by men—though I had no doubt she got some sort of compensation for the latter. It still didn't sit right with me. Not her weakness, nor her treatment at the hands of others. Perhaps she had endured it all for Wendy, and when she was ripped away, she lost her reason for living.

"Do you have any preferences?"

"N-nothing I can think of..."

I smoothed her hair wavy hair down, running my fingers through it. She had beautiful copper locks like her daughter's. Her face, though marred by past injuries and fractures, was still beautiful, and her soft blue eyes showed more than fear. There was a depth there, a hidden intelligence, and a pit of rage that never broke the surface of those blue waters.

I closed my eyes to center myself. Another victim, and she's still a victim! She keeps letting everyone have their way with her so they feel justified in their actions.

I opened my eyes and stared into hers again.

"I'm taking that to mean that you'll allow me to decide then."

She parted her lips for a moment, but no words came. She only nodded.

I laid her down on the ground. "Red, if you wouldn't mind, give us some privacy."

Red walked over and sat with his back to us as I undressed her. Her body bore several fresh bruises, her knees were scraped, and her stomach was bloated by hunger. Either someone was taking her rations, or she wasn't eating.

"Close your eyes, I won't hurt you."

"Mors, we're heavily modifying this one. I want her to be able to defend herself. We'll also be modifying her hormones. She needs a little more oomph. She's abandoned all feelings for herself; she lives life like a marionette, and I want that to change. I want her to get angry when someone takes from her or abuses her. We'll also be adding the teeth."

Now what should I do? Should I limit myself to just one thing, or should I go all out?

I opened my eyes and looked at her again. Yep, all out. *Sorry Fernando, you're going to get a little smaller.*

First thing I'll add is a poisonous tail. I've already made one for Thrall, so this shouldn't be a problem, but bone is too heavy for such a small frame. Let's make hers out of chitin. I rolled her over grafted a scorpion-like tail onto the base of her spine. I made it long enough to strike over her shoulders and flexible enough to go between her legs. She twitched and moved as I connected it to her nerves.

"I'm sorry, am I tickling you?"

"No... It's fine, please don't worry about me."

I placed her tail down and rolled her over on her back. I ran my hands down her legs and fleshcrafted them into those of a predatory cat from the calf down. I made the claws long and lethal. I tightened her tendons similarly to how I'd made Leera and added the extra ones to enhance speed and strength. Like this she could climb and jump with the best of them.

Moving up, I mended her knees. She inhaled sharply as I added the retractable teeth to her entrance. She'd never have a suitor she doesn't want now.

I continued to mend her as I moved up her body. The bruises were only the tip of the iceberg. She had organ damage that couldn't be seen from the outside. It was almost like someone beat her with a bag of rocks.

Human cruelty, as strong as ever, and right under my nose. All of this had to have happened in the last month. God protect them if Wendy saw any of it!

I felt my rage begin to surge as the black liquid poured.

No more! I can't take any more cruelty!

I felt another cold embrace as words barely louder than a whisper filled my head.

"Should we end it all? This is what humanity looks like. Let's consume the world."

"No, there is still hope. I will show you! I'll balance the scales for you, and for them."

"Then suffer, as they have suffered. Let it fill you until you are stuffed and broken. I will always be here for you, as you are mine."

I exhaled a long breath of fog as I opened my eyes. She looked up at me, fresh tears cutting streaks through the dirt on her face.

She reached her hand up and wiped my face. "Are those for me?"

"I don't know anymore; perhaps for you, and for this world. But more and more I think that they aren't mine at all. I think they're for the people I will hurt and murder. I think they're tears of the dead. Maybe of those I will consume, caused by some trigger."

The cold embrace turned warm. *I see, I'm finally understanding now. But if these tears aren't mine, why do I feel them?*

The whispers once again echoed in my mind. *"Lamentations for things not yet done. Tears of victims, both yours and those uncried by the ones in front of you. My followers who are dead inside and those that we will punish for it. You feel them because you are not a monster."*

She didn't resist as I held her close. Instead her thin arms clung to me.

"I don't care who you kill, you protected my daughter. Anyone who does that can't be too bad."

She pulled me in and for the briefest of moments everything felt right in the world. We shared a bond that was Wendy. We both loved her and protected her. We both only wished for her to live a happy life. She had taught her compassion, and I had taught her self-reliance.

So this is a motherly embrace. Mine died a long time ago in a world that I've since abandoned... It's warm and selfless. It gives without expecting anything in return. Is that why she's been taken advantage of? Because she was soft, because she trusted too quickly? Is that why she ended up the way she did?

Too many times putting faith in people that let her down had made her lose faith in people in general. And too many times being beaten, abused, and taken advantage of caused her to devalue herself. Wendy was probably the only thing that got her through.

"I'm sorry, but when I'm done, you won't be able to go back to living how you have been. I won't let you sell yourself or be taken advantage of anymore. Wendy doesn't need a mother like that. You may not have noticed yet, but she's strong. The things you've been through in a lifetime, she's been through in a matter of months. I want her to look at you and see a strong woman. A person that she can rely on, not a doormat for others."

"You wouldn't understand. I've always been weak. We relied on my husband for everything, and when he died, we had nothing! I did what I could, and the fact she's still alive speaks for my sacrifices."

"You let them take her. You let them kill her, not once, but twice."

"I didn't! The first time, I was sending her away from this terrible place! The second time they held me in my house

and beat me until I couldn't fight back. They knocked her unconscious while I watched, then told me that the only reason they let me live was because I was a good lay. I killed myself to spite them!"

She slapped me, and I grabbed her hand. She was frail, but my cheek still hurt. It wasn't the physical impact, it was the sentiment. She didn't have any other way to tell me how she felt.

"I understand, but soon you won't be trapped in the life you've lived. Show me, and her, who you can be when you're strong. Stand up for yourself and protect her! If you're like that, then any man would count himself lucky to have you in their lives. They won't degrade or humiliate you anymore."

"Then you'll protect me?"

"No, that's the point I'm trying to make. I'll give you the tools; use them and live. For you and for her. Stand up, and if they push you, push back, with everything you have. It's a lesson Wendy learned, now it's your turn."

I wiped the tears from her face and laid her back down. I added a mane going from her shoulders around her clavicles. I added claws to her hands long enough to kill and made them retractable. After I mended her face, I finished by giving her fangs, long and terrible. She already had a mana-generating heart, but I made all the hair on her body able to gather mana as well. If she attended a few magic classes, she would be able to become a great caster. The last thing I did was to adjust her hormones for her new body. I simply boosted the production of what was already there, so she wouldn't be growing a beard or getting any strange growth spurts. Everything was kept in balance.

She was now formidable. She wouldn't be inferior to anyone in terms of power. The rest was up to her.

I smoothed down her hair one last time and helped her to stand. "It's done. You'll never be a victim again as long as you don't want to be."

She stumbled as she got used to having paws, and I caught her. She seemed to become aware of her nudity and quickly reached for her dress, accidentally gouging part of it with her claws.

"It'll become easier. Don't rush it." I helped her to dress and repaired her clothes.

I looked up as I worked on her dress to make it more tail-friendly, and she smiled down at me. "You just keep a needle and thread in your pocket?"

"I... Uh, yeah."

"And you seem better at it than I am."

"Yeah, I've had practice..."

"Did you make her clothes too?"

"Yes."

Her eyes seemed to light up. There was something new there that wasn't there before, but I couldn't tell what.

"You know... I really appreciate everything you've done. For her, for me, and for the other girls. Her father, he wasn't a good man, but he always took care of us even though I couldn't help out much. She was too young to remember him well, so now when she talks about her father, I know she's talking about you. It makes me sad, but I think he would have approved."

She looked into my eyes, her shyness and trepidation now forgotten. Though I guess that's expected given what had just happened.

"Ah!"

"What?"

I just sewed my finger to her hem!

"It's, uh, give me a minute here."

I bit the string and pulled it out as she laughed at me. It was a small laugh, still lacking confidence, but it was a step in the right direction.

"Are you going to do this for all the ladies?"

"No, but your changes were extensive. I also fixed your injuries. You're still beautiful you know; this time don't let

anyone change that. Not physically, and not mentally."

She nodded and reached her hand down to help me up. I held on for a minute, feeling the soft fur and the sharp, hidden points at the end of her fingers. I looked over my work.

She was furry from toe to right above knee level, and from finger to bicep. Her mane went from below her neck and traced its way around her delicate clavicles, ending above her breasts on her chest. Of course I matched it all to her hair, a natural copper hair color.

She caught me staring and smiled demurely.

I cleared my throat. "Okay, I think everything looks fine. You're free to go."

"I would... but..." She pointed to her hand, which I was still holding.

"Oh, right, you might want to take this with you, it being attached and all." I laughed nervously.

"Well, maybe you can borrow it again someday."

It was my turn to blush. That could have a few meanings, but I think she meant I could hold it again.

"I'd like that."

I walked her around Red and down the stairs to the gasps of the crowd.

The woman who had made a scene and plotted my death and the death of that boy stood and screamed, "You expect us to become something as hideous as that!"

Adria's hand gripped mine.

"Oh, I don't know about that. To me she's more attractive than ever, but making you more hideous would be a challenge. But I'll tell you what, let's give it a shot."

I released Adria after I found her a seat and nodded to Reginauld. He and some of the other gobs on guard duty grabbed the woman and dragged her up to my throne kicking and screaming.

"Red, this one seems confident enough to scream at me, so it's fair to say she doesn't need any privacy."

He rose with a grin and resumed his place by the double doors.

I ripped her dress off; compared to the others, hers was thick and floral-patterned. She was pampered, the money likely coming at the cost of the town's food.

I pointed to the heads above my throne. "Which is your husband's?"

She stopped screaming and stood there while my gobs held her in place. Her eyes looked at me with unrestrained malice as she eked out a reply. "The one on the right! You dare to make a display of his suffering, you beat me, then you disgrace me in front of everyone! No one will ever accept you, you're a monster, a demon, a fiend! And now everyone knows it."

She smiled as she spit one insult after another at me. I could tell it was a belief held by those that have never felt pain themselves. They think they're invulnerable because they haven't been hurt before. Even when I resurrected the townspeople, they didn't feel much. I stopped their hearts and gave them all the basic abilities. True, I had clubbed their heads in. I taught them dread, I taught them suffering, but this one didn't learn. This one had enough hatred left in her to kill. She wanted so badly to believe that she was in the right, simply because she used to be high on the social ladder. Even here, we were still just bit players on the stage of eternity. Me included—I'll outlast everyone and everything, but the void is truly humbling. Maybe she needed a better lesson. Turning her into a flaming head would surely show her, but it wouldn't deter her. People can't hear them. My torches are silent to those without soul steal capabilities. But if a necromancer activated it within a mile of here, they would likely fall to the ground clenching their ears.

No, she needed to become a living example. But first, a reunion.

I stopped her heart and used soul steal. I also stole her husband's soul from his head.

I closed my eyes and opened both their screens.

He was curled up in a ball sobbing hysterically as she moved over to him.

"Donus? Donus! Is that you!?"

The man stayed curled in a ball as she desperately tried to get him to answer.

"Yes, it's him."

"Then he's not dead?"

"No, he lives to burn now. Little more than human lamp oil."

I picked him up as he continued to plead incoherently.

"Donus, I believe she called you. Do you know who this is?"

He stopped mumbling for a moment and seemed to finally notice her. He nodded briefly before he began to plead with me again.

I sat him back down as he hugged his knees and rocked.

"I'll make you a deal. You can live again, but she'll become a torch in your place. Do you agree?"

His eyes lit up as he smiled broadly. "YES! Please! Yes!"

"Of course, she'll feel all the same things you felt. It'll be unending torture, until her soul burns out at last."

"I don't care! Just do it! Now! Please, just make it stop..."

"Very well."

I infused his soul back into his head, returning him to his suffering.

She fell to the ground and sat there unmoving.

"This is the man you hate me so much for taking away from you?"

She nodded.

"You and he are a lot alike, you know. I've felt both your souls, and you would have sold him out just as he did you."

She nodded again.

It looked like the time for pretense was over.

"But you taught me something. People see these torches, but they don't understand them. You still schemed, plotted, and killed. Perhaps to some, status is worth more than their life. So relax, you won't be a torch. I've got something else in mind for you."

She looked up at me. "Will it hurt?"

"Not in the way you're thinking, but you will serve as a lesson. Just like he was supposed to be."

She began to scream as I closed out of the soul screen.

I opened my eyes and looked at her body, still being held up by my gobs.

"It's alright, let her down. She won't be struggling."

They unceremoniously released her to thud against the wooden floor.

I'll make her outsides match her insides.

"Mors, we're making a Naga. A toothless one, with no venom."

"Are you sure Master? Even without teeth they can still be dangerous."

"Not this one; we won't be adding any abilities. She'll be weaker than a child of this town. At worst she may become a pest."

I fused her legs together and converted them into that of a snake. I gave her the head of a cobra and shortened her arms into frail, almost useless appendages. I stripped her vocal cords, so she would now only speak in harsh whispers. I added scales in place of skin, all about the thickness of a fingernail.

When I was done I looked at the useless creature I had made and brought up the soul screen to show her.

"This was once your body. You won't be able to do much anymore, but I'm sure your friends will take care of you right. It's not like they're shallow people who only care about how you look. I would say you could still wear your expensive dresses, but with all the time you're going to be spending crawling on the ground, I doubt they'd hold up

very well. You'd also need someone to dress you, but you'll have no problems there, will you?"

She looked at her new form in horror. I could feel her soul quiver as it all set in.

She now spoke in a humble, pleading tone. "Please. I'm sorry I claimed you hit me! I'm sorry I called you names and whispered behind your back... Just don't turn me into that."

"I know about the boy."

She froze and slowly looked over at me with wide eyes.

"Your old body is gone. This is all that's left of you now."

"But I have a son, how am I supposed to take care of him like this?"

"In goblin culture, the young are raised by all, and everyone takes pride in helping them. Your son will be fine, we will all raise him. As far as your personal survival goes though, I guess you can take up Adria's old job. I'm not sure you'll get many suitors looking like that, but who knows? Maybe someone has some special tastes."

Ah, shit. I'm going to have to warn Bob about who she is inside, or he'll add another one to his harem and I'll have to see her every day.

I infused her back into her body and started her heart. After a few moments she began thrashing around violently. I held her on the ground until she calmed down.

"I told you Master."

"Mors, not the time."

I looked into her eyes. I'm sure she'd be crying if I hadn't taken away her ability to do so. *No more crocodile tears for you.*

She was gripping something in her hands. I let her go and slowly backed away as she held it to her chest.

It was her dress, now ripped and dirty. Vanity, even now. I think the loss of material things hurt her more than anything. Well, at least she'll never have to worry about getting wrinkles—or laugh lines.

She attempted to stand but failed. Learning to balance on that tail would take some time. She'd have to practice for a long while before she could stand upright.

"Go on, slither back to your friends."

She moved awkwardly along the ground, half slithering, half crawling. The other women shrieked in horror as she came near. *I guess fear of snakes is relatively universal—especially one as huge as her.*

After they began throwing things at her and stomping on her, I ordered my gobs to take her outside.

"Now then, ladies. For most of you there will be no need to undress, as you won't be modified so extensively. I'm sorry you had to see that, but she was truly a snake in all ways. She poisoned one of our own for no reason other than his race. Now, she's got a race of her own."

I went through the rest. I had to stop their hearts and interview them in soul form to see their level of guilt. Our town now had three lamias. The rest opted to be what their husbands were, though I kept my promise and restricted the fur to arms and legs and left their faces human, and feminine. I also improved whatever perceived faults they had, though I didn't agree with most. And the undecided ones I made into cat girls. I know, it's a cop out, but I was tired, and original thought was quickly escaping me. I just wanted to get my mates, curl up in our warm pile, and try my damndest to forget today.

I opened the doors, and everyone made their way out.

It's safe to say that most were not pleased. But I thought they'd grow to like the change eventually, barring four of them who now showed their sins to all who look. I doubt my gobs will forgive them easily for their involvement or knowledge of her having poison and using it on one of their own. After I interviewed them, I found that they were all planning to do the same. The boy had just been the trial run. Their conversation had turned dangerous after I left to revive the boy earlier, and a new conspiracy was born: They

were going to try to pick us off one after the other and pretend it was some sort of disease. I decided I'd keep one of the plants, and at the next town meeting I'd eat it to keep like-minded people from trying to assassinate me or my own.

I kept forgetting they didn't know I can become undead. But it's not knowledge I wanted them to learn either. They could hire someone who could actually hurt me, a healer or even some sort of necromancer who'd know about soul prisons. There's a lot I still don't know about this world.

Of course after learning about this I promised them leniency if they turned over the plants they were raising, along with any baking goods and honey. If they didn't comply, then I'd have fewer lamias and more nagas. In a way it sucks; I've always liked lamias. Well, hopefully they'd pull through and become better people now that they'd be on the receiving side of prejudice.

I waited patiently for the last person to leave before I plopped down in my throne.

Reginauld came up to me.

"Chief, if I may have a minute of your time."

"You know you don't have to call me chief."

"I do when you're sitting in that chair."

I got off the chair and sat on the step; it was actually more comfortable.

"What is it, Reginauld?"

"I'm sure you've heard about the Kobold rebellion."

"Yeah, a few times now, from a few different people."

"Any time one of us mates with something that isn't a goblin, we get a new, usually more powerful, clan and prosper for a while. But the point when they realize they're more powerful always comes. Then if we're lucky they split off from us and go their own way. But most of the time they challenge me in an attempt to take over and make us their servants."

"I'm aware. But you're still here, and your village was doing fine until the bandits."

"That's because physical power is not always greater than experience when it comes to combat. My point is that whether or not it was your intent, you have divided our town into different races. They may someday form clans and attempt to break away or take what you have made."

"Our gobs are still stronger *and* more experienced. These people here have never seen combat."

"Be that as it may, by making an example of that woman, I fear you have set some against us."

"Then I'll repeat it over and over."

"And if you're not here, sir?"

"If they intend harm to us, or anyone else, kill them. If they want to leave, open the gates and wish them well. I'll not keep those who don't want to stay."

"I fear that time may yet come."

"I've done what I can. Tonight I took their old identities away and gave them something new. I also showed them a banner, and although it may not hold value yet, it soon will. Until then, have faith that the smart ones see what this town has accomplished since we came. Let them make their own decisions on what's right for them. I won't hold it against them if they think we're wrong. Adversity is sometimes the best way to see where your faults lie."

"And what of their children? They're still human, will they not grow jealous or even come to hate you for changing their parents?"

"If they want me to, I can change them as well. As for the ones who want to remain human and want their parents to return to being human, we'll cross that bridge when we have to."

"Sir, I belie—"

"Reginauld, I'm sorry, but I'm tired. I've dealt with liars, victims, and murderers, even a torch. I'm going to bed."

He shut his mouth with a troubled expression, bowed, and departed.

I went into my bedroom and crashed down on my mattress. It seemed cold with no one else there. How long had it been since I'd slept alone? I closed my eyes, but my thoughts were troubled. I hadn't seen Threscia at all today. She usually turns up even if it's just to make some snarky comment.

I overlaid my believers with my map. There was one that was far off and moving, the brightest one. *I just have to have faith that she's okay and not seeking revenge on her own.*

Still, tears of my victims were yet to come—and of my followers. But why did they sink into people? Why did I absorb them back? Why did I feel them?

I felt a warmth I didn't understand as I drifted off.

Chapter 6 — Bob

The boss sent me out here to this backwater village. Not ta say there ain't any lookers here, but damn I miss Muffy and Buffy, er, Mark. I hope the boss gets a kick out of that time bomb.

"Excuse me commander, but why are you laughing?"

Ah, Thrall. This guy's all like, "Kill this, kill that." I had ta bite his tail off on the second day. Giving this guy something like that was like giving a five-year-old a gun. Sure, he knows what it does, but he doesn't seem to understand that dyin' ain't fun for everybody.

"The mud's just ticklin' my spunkbunkers. I can tickle yours for ya if ya bend over and say, 'Please, Mother, may I?'"

"I certainly will not!"

"Come on, if you finish first then you can be mother next."

He went through a range of expressions you wouldn't believe possible with that skeletal face. I love fuckin' with people...in every way.

He looked at my hooves, which were sunken into the mud. "Maybe we should get you some little boots for your little hooves."

"What'd you say to me, ya walkin' rawhide?" I kicked him and watched him soar into a far-off tree. "GOAL!!"

No one calls me little boots, or they get one up their ass. Too bad this mook doesn't have one. He came sprinting back with a fresh crack down his body.

"Good shot! Too bad it didn't kill me... Little hooves!"

"Close enough."

He looked at me with confusion as his body instantly collided with the mud, and I pressed my 'little hooves' into

his non-existent asshole.

He let out several pained shrieks as his exoskeleton cracked, ending with a satisfied coo when it gave way.

"Nooo! Please stop..."

I stopped.

"Tsk." He sighed, got up, and cleared his throat. "Erm, so I'm still alive, huh?"

I just stared at him.

He looked away. "Yeah, that was, um. Let's not talk about it again."

"Ahh! You're one of those."

"One of whats, sir!? I'll not have any slander. You should know I'm the ex-disciple of the god of death!"

"Yeah, Bob, nice ta meetcha. Want me ta do it again?"

He shivered. "No! What's wrong with you..."

"Say mother may I."

"Ermhmm. Mot—"

"Commander, we have our first sacrifice!" It was the scarred gob I named Leroy after he charged into a group of villagers without his weapons.

"Alright, Leroy, lay 'em on us!"

He walked back and retrieved a frail person in a black cloak. He held their small wrinkled hand and together they ambled towards us with all the speed of a narcoleptic zombie.

Great, they're givin' us the Cryptkeeper over here.

"Come on, girl, let off the brakes."

They eventually arrived, and she stood there shaking like a leaf in the wind. "What's wrong, gal, forget ta turn off the vibrator?"

"The what? Oh no, son, I'm just so excited. It's been so long since I've went anywhere." She raised her hood and I caught a red gleam.

I leapt in the air as Thrall bowed down, but nothing came. Not even me.

I landed and looked at the ugly old bat. Several seconds passed before Thrall shouted, "Take me, death! I am your slave!" After nothing continued happening, he looked around.

"Don't worry, bud, there's always next time."

I took in the old woman's face. Calling it a rotten jack-o-lantern would be an insult to pumpkins. She had no nose, and the rest looked like she took an acid bath every morning.

"Damn, girl, do you kill your mother with that face?"

She frowned, or at least I think that's what that crinkled mass was trying to do. "I think that's a little rude."

"I'd tell ya to turn the other cheek, but I'm afraid of what I'd find."

She gasped at me.

"What? Ya got four of 'em, and I'm sure they're all prettier than what's between 'em."

She gasped again.

"Come on, sister, if ya keep inhaling like that, ya might inflate that soggy balloon ya call a face."

She doubled over for a moment and I thought I might've killed her, but her wheezing turned into a wry chuckle.

"Ahh, there ya go. Feels good to let that loose, don't it? I woulda told you to get the stick outta yer ass, but I think that's all that's holding ya up."

She nodded and held out her hand. "Some call me witch, some call me seer, but you may call me Quenelia."

I took her dainty hand and licked its length while inhaling deeply. "Oh yeah, that's the stuff. Mugwort with...do I detect a hint of dead crow?"

She chuckled again. "Wormwood actually, the dead crow is incidental... That was breakfast."

"A cannibal, huh, you'll fit right in. Now hop on, we got places to be and people to do."

She smiled a crooked grin as Leroy helped her up. She began to straddle me, but I stopped her.

"Better sit side saddle; if ya spread yer legs too fast the vacuum might kill me."

I felt her stop. "I'm just joshin, straddle away. Let's clear them cobwebs. Ya ain't got crabs, do ya?"

"Crabs? What are... No."

"Well, ya do now."

She tilted her head down to look at me with a quizzical expression.

"Ah, don't worry about it, you'll find out in a day or so."

Thrall alternated glances between me and Quenelia. "My lady, I wish you safe, or deadly, travel. When next we meet I would be pleased if you would do me the honor of providing discourse."

"Dis, or Inter? Well, Papa always said to follow yer heart. That's how he died."

Everyone looked at me in silence until Thrall sighed. "And pray tell, did he die of a heart related malady?"

"Nope, Asian hooker."

"So then the sex worker killed him?"

"Nah, he had a heart attack..."

Damn, I didn't know there were crickets in this world.

"Erm, well then, am I to assume you're leaving matters here?" Thrall smiled from bony cheek to bony cheek. "At my discretion."

I looked at Thrall and Leroy. Couple of geniuses here.

"Hell, you should be the one to carry the sacrifices on yer back since it was yer idea."

He began panting.

"I'll tell ya what. Yer in charge, but don't kill anything ya can't stick yer dick in."

He smiled for a moment before his expression went sour.

"Ahh, see ya!"

I ran at half speed as she dug her bony fingers into my fur. I felt a sudden wetness and I swear the old bat musta creamed herself, or myself, as I'm the one who has to deal with it.

I stopped for a snack break.

"Hey, granny, did ya enjoy yerself as much as it felt like up there?"

"Oh no, sonny, this old bladder just doesn't listen sometimes."

I inhaled deeply and let out a sigh of satisfaction.
"Kinky!"

But there was something else in the air something familiar.

"Hold on tight, granny, yer grandkids are visitin'."

I found him, up in the trees.

"Hey, kid. Lotta good being a tree ninja does ya when yer friends are marching zombies through the forest."

"Shut up! I'm the—"

I shook the tree he was sitting in and he hit the ground with a thump.

"What's with the eyepatch?"

He rubbed his head. "If I were to take this off, everything I looked at would burst into flames. I'm the—"

I ripped off his eyepatch.

"Heeey!"

"Ya wanna see the real deal?"

I threw it in the air. "I'mma firin' ma balls!"

Two small fireballs rocketed off from in front of my mouth and ash rained down as Athan cupped his hands and caught a few of the bigger pieces.

He shot out all four spikes and took an obviously rehearsed stance.

"Ooh, scary. But ya don't have ta do all this stuff ta get her to notice you."

"G-get who to notice me?"

"Come on, ya think I ain't noticed? Just grab 'er hand and make with the kissy faces. Ain't that right, granny?"

"Oh, I'm a little outta touch with romance."

"Ya gotta be kidding me, you got the thigh muscles of a Clydesdale. I bet you've seen more dicks then an outhouse

wall."

"No, I'm afraid, I don't really care for them. I've always been a seer."

"Damn, now I have ta explain things to two virgins."

Athan just stared at me. "I can't touch her, she told me everything she touches dies."

"Lil'sis? Nah, Wendy maybe, but Lil'sis, no way."

I sniffed the air. Ah, dead things comin'... Why does that turn me on—oh, who'm I kiddin'? I know why.

"Ya gotta take 'er interests into account. Tell her she smells like dead stuff, or that she looks good in that hood. Maybe take 'er to a cemetery ta make some new friends."

"I've tried all that! She just won't budge."

"Have you tried not being such a whiny little bitch?"

He resumed his Red Ranger pose, anger in his eyes.

"Ah, chill yer nuts, little one. Have you actually told 'er how you feel?"

He slumped and looked at the ground. "I don't even know what I'd say."

"Why do ya like her?"

"I don't know, her face and stuff."

"Yeah, that'll be great, tell 'er ya like her face 'n stuff. Maybe focus more on the stuff part."

His eyes lit up. "Really!?"

"Yeah really, otherwise you're just beatin' around the bush, which means you won't be beatin' around *her* bush."

He smiled at me and ran off towards the herd of zombies that was beating a noisy path through the woods.

I felt something ominous from my back and damn near tossed Granny Saggy Tits into the woods.

"What the fu—"

She began cackling. "Oh no, this'll be something to watch. Keep your eyes forward, sonny, this is about to get interesting."

"Damnit, granny, no one likes a spoiler."

Athan ran up to Lil'sis and began making exaggerated hand motions in front of his chest. He then pointed to her waist and made some pelvic thrusts.

"Yep, that's John's boy alright. He's about as smooth as sandpaper and twice as abrasive."

There was a resounding slap, followed by a kick.

"Oh... Ouch."

He slowly fell to his knees as she walked past. She gestured back and each zombie kicked him as well.

He held his hand out towards her with an expression like, 'Why?'

"Eh, chalk it up ta cultural differences."

I waited as she slowly got closer. "That was your idea, wasn't it?"

"I only told 'im he needed ta make things clear."

"I was fine with the way things were. I'm not mommy material. I'd rather focus on getting stronger than dealing with teenage boys and their hormones."

"Ah, shut up and give ol' uncle Bob a hug!"

I hugged her and she let out a little 'eep.'

"Come on now, did he really deserve all that?"

"That's the price you pay for offending me. I'm the daughter of John, and the disciple of the great Ralphus. I'm not some housewife who just exists to spit out babies. I'll never be looked down on again."

"But yer short."

She hit me with her mace. "You know what I mean!"

I rubbed my arm. "Okay then, little miss scare all. What're ya gonna do when ya end up like this old bat?" I pointed to Quenelia.

Lil'sis looked up at Quenelia. "I like your robes. Dad made mine." She spun around.

"Those are nice, dearie. Don't heed this one. My life hasn't been that bad, at least not the last part of it. You don't have to bow to any man."

Lil'sis nodded. "Don't let Bob scare you; Dad isn't going to kill you. He'll probably even give you back your youth."

"Oh, I know. I've seen my death, and it's still a long way away. Actually... No, never mind. Sensing too far off makes things change."

Is she tied with my goddess? God, I'll never forget how she felt. How do you describe something that's both brief and endless...? Does that make me my own grandpa?

I smiled as I felt something rise.

"...And that's my cue to leave. You two have a safe journey," Lil'sis said. She gestured to one of her larger zombies and it trotted back and picked up Athan, who was still cupping his manhood.

As the procession shambled by, Athan shook his fist at me and I was off again.

I jumped over a log. "Ah, fuck!"

"What is it, dearie?"

"I'll show ya later if you're a good girl... Or a bad one... Or not one at all."

"What!?"

"Don't worry, you'll see." I laughed.

Chapter 7 — John

Where the hell was Threscia?

I went to see Roscia today. Despite how bad her father started out. He's actually helped out a lot. He saw how his daughters were treated and turned his thinking around. I've come to believe that both he and Threscia's mother were forced to live here, like most.

Threscia's mother in particular could now smile like the rest. And just like her daughter's, her smile could light up a room.

They gave me some root tea, and I caught up with Roscia while she tended to her younger siblings.

"Are you going to make me a cat girl, too?"

"Er, if you want, I guess. I'm sorry about being so distant lately. How have things been here?"

"I'm fine. Hey, check out what Liz showed me!"

She sat her baby brother down and pointed her hand towards the fireplace. Flames shot from her palm and the wood ignited immediately.

"Now I can really murder stuff!"

I ruffled her hair and she smiled at me. God damn, these girls are my kryptonite. I don't know what I'd do if something ever happened to them again. But they've shown me that they aren't helpless, so all I can do is trust them. And help whenever they need me. Which so far hasn't been much.

There was a knock at the door and a familiar face popped up in the small window, only to disappear again repeatedly.

"Ro...sie... It's...me!" she said between hops.

"Wendy!" Roscia squealed as she opened the door.

The two girls hugged until Wendy noticed me. "Poppa!"

She came running full tilt and smashed into me. I gave her a bear hug and sat her down.

"How've you been, kiddo?"

"Great! Momma's happier too! She also looks...different."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Everyone needed to change so things could get better around here."

"I don't mind, but she kept asking about you. Like, what you like and stuff."

"Oh, what'd you tell her?"

She smiled up at me. "I told her that you like dead stuff, and strong people!"

"Yep, I guess that's about right."

I caught up with the two of them for a while and gave some piggyback rides to Roscia's little siblings before I gave them each a big hug and left.

Roscia had no idea where Threscia went or why she wasn't back yet. She only told me not to worry.

Well I am worried, damnit! If you care about someone you don't just disappear without a word.

"Master, I really think she's fine."

"You too, Mors?"

"Not only has she enhanced herself, she also has fleshcrafting level 5 and a ghoul's stomach. It would take a lot to kill her for good."

"But she isn't me; she doesn't have an undead mode. One arrow shot without her noticing and she's gone."

"Have you felt a pulling sensation?"

"No..."

"Then she's fine."

I shook my head. "I guess I'll leave her to whatever it is she's doing. Ralphus is supposed to be back today anyway. Hopefully he brought back something interesting. I'll have to get to him before Lang, or I won't see him for a few days."

That reminds me, I still have to make that doll, and I should probably at least look at the book Ralphus brought last time. Liz and Languoria have been using it to teach

everyone basic magic, so I may be the only person here who hasn't read any of it.

I walked to the converted town hall. I still find it strange that this building is smaller than the church. Liz was sitting on the floor, slumped over a table sleeping. She still had a piece of charcoal clutched in her hand where she had been writing something on a large piece of parchment. I crept up to her and looked over her shoulder. It was titled Helpful Chants. I read over them a bit. Hmm, chanting looked a lot like programming. You have qualifiers, conditions, and modifiers. I could possibly use this; I'd have to get her to teach me one-on-one later.

I looked down at her peaceful, sleeping face and tucked her hair behind her beautifully pointed ear. She furrowed her brows for a moment but soon drifted off again.

I sat down beside her and gently took the book from under her arm and began to skim through it.

There were spells for most basic things, all in chant form. If I wanted to learn any of these I would need to learn chanting first. There was also a section where the handwriting changed. Ralphus' Soul Magic!

There was a list of necromancer spells and general soul enchanting. I looked down at the plate and chains I wore and thumbed to the enchanting menu.

Soul Lift:

Use this enchantment to make something lighter. Be warned, however, that it only lasts as long as the soul does.

My tests with rat souls have shown that I can lighten an iron ball for almost a year on just one soul.

Hold the soul prison in one hand and chant the following while touching the object:

Vinctum anima mea, minus gravibus, Ralphus ingenius est.

Looks like I'm finally getting some use out of ancient language translation. And the last part of that spell seems

unnecessary.

Soul Sphere:

I've experimented with the soul fire spell by condensing bound soul energy into a form that could cause physical damage. This spell is the result. It takes advantage of a soul's natural power to consume and alter matter it touches. Be careful, as holding the sphere for too long may cause it to explode.

Simply hold your soul prison and recite the following while consciously thinking of a sphere forming in your palm:

Vinctum anima mea, sphaera, Ralphus habet ingens mentula!

This spell takes time to master. Never practice alone and never play with your balls.

...Yep, that's a Ralphus spell all right. But I could use a projectile...I wonder how I can do it since my soul prison is inside of me, and also contains my own soul.

I opened the soul screen.

Soul of Caroline: 100%

Ah... That's right... I'm a murderer.

I closed the soul screen and rested my head on Liz's shoulder. I felt her stir with a jerk then saw her teal eyes staring into mine.

"John?" She yawned. "What are you doing here? Wait... Why am I still here? I've got to go train with my unit!"

I softly stroked her ear and she shivered as she shot me a red-faced glare.

"It's okay, I'm sure they can live without you for a time. More importantly, doesn't it hurt to sit like that?"

She rolled over on her side and rubbed her knees.

"Centaur's must have it hard, huh?"

She noticed where my attention was and moved her dress back down into place.

I turned around and laid her head in my lap. "It's okay to stay with me for a while, isn't it? We haven't really spent much time together since we took the town and you've been on double duty."

She yawned again, and I resumed running my fingers along the outside of her ear. She made a funny little smile, but after a while her body relaxed, and she reached her arm around me.

"Why do you treat me like this?"

"Because this is what you deserve. You work hard for everyone but yourself. In fact, the only times I see you get selfish is when we're..."

She blushed but kept her eyes closed. "I feel guilty sometimes. Like maybe you would be better off with your others. Like I'm taking you away from them."

"You need to have more confidence in yourself. You're beautiful and bright, diligent and hardworking. Anyone would feel honored to have you. Perhaps it's me who's taking you away from someone else. Some doe-eyed young man who would take you off to some farmstead and away from strife and cruelty."

She smiled wryly as I continued rubbing her. "I'm stained, jet black. I'm damaged beyond any repair, and I always have been. If an innocent man were to try to marry me, I would refuse because I could never tell him who I am. I could never be me with him, and he would never understand. With you I don't feel judged or persecuted. I don't care if I die; you've given me a place to feel safe for the first time in my life. And you're the first man to make me feel...attractive."

"I find that hard to believe." I pinched her cheek as she grabbed my hand and placed it back on her ear.

Long gone was the emaciated waif that I had first met. She had a healthy look to her now. True, she was still skinny, but now her features had softened. In terms of outright beauty, she wouldn't lose to any of the villagers here. Not

even the ones who had me beautify them. It's part of what makes her special to me. She was always beautiful, but it was hidden by starvation and hardship. Now when I look at her all I see is an amazing woman that I'm proud to call mine.

Her eyes popped open. "Um, my pillow seems to have gotten lumpy. Just what are you thinking about?"

I smiled down at her. "You."

Her ears flushed and she sat up suddenly, averting her eyes.

"If you keep acting like that I might actually start to think you're innocent. But we both know better."

She covered her mouth with her hand and began to pant. I leaned in and pulled her hand away from her mouth as her cool fog drifted out through her wet lips. The moment our mouths met she shoved me down and straddled me, keeping me in place.

"Liz, are—"

"Shh! No more speaking."

She leaned forward and put her hand over my mouth while she raised her skirt and moved her panties to the side.

She ripped my pants down and with a quick motion slammed herself onto me.

No one would think that a girl like her would act like this. But that smile she had told me everything. This was the true Liz, with her hidden passion that burned for me.

I could feel myself growing inside of her as she lost herself in her first orgasm.

I reached down to roll her over, but she grabbed my hands and held them on the ground as she continued pounding her petite frame against me. Her eyes were wide as she stared into mine with a victorious look on her face.

She kissed me so hard I could barely breath as her hips threatened to grind me to nothing.

I felt my twins shifting and pushing deeper into her, pressing up against her second gate until it finally parted

and I was buried.

In this moment I couldn't think about or feel anything but Liz, and she knew it. Her tongue aggressively sought mine as she began to moan into my mouth. I began to thrust upwards, but she held me by the throat.

"Stay still! You're mine, so you lie there and let me take in every part of you!"

It sent shivers down my spine. There's being wanted, and then there's this. This was something different; it was like she saved up everything for moments like this.

"Oh, you liked that, did you? I can feel you getting harder!"

She tightened the grip on my throat and I felt myself hitting my limit.

"Don't come until I tell you to..."

She pressed all her weight into me, grinding me against her walls as she arched her back.

I felt her muscles starting to contract as she made eye contact.

"Don't you dare look away! I want to look into your eyes as you release everything inside of me. I need you to know that I made you do it. That I forced you to come in me."

Holy hell, note to me: Never let Liz get pent up again.

She released a long moan that seemed to come from deep inside of her as she began moving faster.

"Come for me! Come for me now!"

I released everything. It was like a volcano erupted inside her as the wet sounds of our flesh slamming together echoed in the small room.

Her body stiffened as she lay on top of me, and my seed flooded out as her muscles squeezed.

Her hands loosened their grip and I tucked her hair behind her ear.

"Feel better?"

She looked at me with a deep blush.

"Please don't judge me for that."

I kissed her softly this time as I slid my hand under her blouse. I could feel myself growing hard again.

"I'll never judge you for your passion. It's just... I've never been loved like that before."

"It doesn't scare you?"

"How could it? You're amazing, and to know that you feel so much for me could only make me happy. Now." I squeezed her small breast and pinched her nipple. She closed her eyes for a moment. "Are you ready for round two?"

Her eyes lit up for just a second as her smile returned.

"Oh no, this time it's my turn."

I raised her up slowly, and as I slipped out of her cervix she yelped. Once I was out our juices began to pour from her. She gave me a timid expression as she sat there letting everything out.

"It's okay, by now I know how that will happen."

"But it's too unladylike. And now that I'm a Chief's mate I need to—"

"Nothing, just be yourself. And it's not like I don't love your dirty side. But now it's my turn."

I moved behind her. "Stand up."

She tried to stand, but her legs were too shaky. I pulled her hind legs up and positioned myself.

"Wow, you're sopping wet back here." I inserted one finger, then two. She let out some stifled 'ahhs' and pressed back against me.

I placed each twin by a hole and slowly pushed forward. Her knees buckled, but I held her up as I felt her start to give in.

She took me in slowly and leaned forward onto the table as my twins sank deeper into her warmth.

I pulled back slightly and—

"Lang! Lang! Are you in there?"

There was a pounding at the door and a familiar voice.

Damnit! Not now!

I started to pull out, but Liz pressed back, and I slid in deeper.

The doors burst open and there was a gust of wind as Liz stood beside me, her dress pushed down and her clothes fixed.

Ralphus came running in. His robes were ripped in several places and blood flowing from fresh wounds.

"Lan—"

"John! I need to find... By the void man, put those things away, will you?"

Liz, though flushed, looked to be oblivious as to why I was in my current state. Ralphus looked from me to her and cocked his head.

I mentally cursed Liz. *At least own up to your part!* Then the room went silent except for a dripping sound that came from between Liz's front legs.

Ralphus opened his mouth and held up a finger, but Liz was already gone.

Why does this keep happening to me? Oh yeah, public places, during normal hours.

I tucked the unsatisfied twins back into their cloth cage.

"Sorry about that. What happened to you?"

"There's trouble around the academy, as well as within it. Where to start? Is Lang here?"

"I'm not sure where she is, but she might be getting food, or making a lesson plan."

He stroked his fledgling beard. "Maybe it's better to tell you first." He wiped his brow and sat down on the floor.

"Are you sure you don't want me to mend you first?"

"Oh, this? This is nothing."

"Well, I remember the last time you thought an injury was nothing, and you were actually missing most of your upper body."

"Ack, fine. I'll tell you while you work."

He opened the top of his robe, and I began mending him as he spoke.

"The cult of Rossereth has surrounded the academy. They claim there's something inside that they want and threatened to cut off our trading routes if we don't give it to them. That means we'll starve."

"Well, I owe you one. We could march down there and solve that problem. I know Liz mentioned that Rossereth's followers were terrible people, so I wouldn't mind helping you be rid of them."

"That's only part of it. Barzealis was imprisoned by Eunice. She hopes to figure out the secret of his transformation by tearing him apart and studying the pieces. She's obsessed with regaining her youth. It's only a matter of time until he tells her about you, then she'll track down this place and no one will be safe."

"That isn't right. I gave him that body, it's not up to someone else to take it away, especially not for personal gain. And I'm sorry, friend, but if she intends to harm me or my people, then I won't hesitate to kill her."

"It's not just that. What do you think she'll do if she recognizes Lang? She'll cut her to shreds right beside Barz. I can't let that happen! It's all one big... How do you say it in your language? Clusterfuck!"

He wiped his brow and ran his hand down his chubby face.

"The cult has a blood elemental. I barely escaped; he reformed at the same speed that I cut him down. It was only luck that I brought a bunch of rare parts with me and was able to make a flesh golem that could keep him at bay long enough for me to escape."

Is it wrong of me to suddenly feel disappointed? Also, what the hell's a blood elemental?

I finished mending him. "Well, it's good that you're relatively unharmed."

"Just luck. Now, the way things stand, if you were to wipe out the cult of Rossereth, then Eunice would have free reign to waltz right out and track you down. But if we leave them

alone, odds are that a lot of good students will die. Well, maybe not good, but definitely not the worst. My point is that Lang and I will—"

"We'll what?" Lang appeared almost like a shadow behind Ralphus and wrapped her arms around him.

It's often struck me how Lang and Liz get along so well. No wonder I had to mend a mysterious pelvic injury he had. When it comes to love, I bet they have similar ideals.

Ralphus grabbed her arms and turned to embrace her. "We'll need to leave! I'm not sure where, but we'll need to go soon. Things are getting bad at the academy, and enemies surround it."

"I'm not leaving this place! John and Liz have been great, and I like working with the children and seeing them improve."

Ralphus's eyes went dark as he hugged her close. "I'm sorry, dear, but as strong as John is, and as many warriors as he has, Eunice is too powerful. As soon as Barz tells her about John, she'll arm herself with all the relics in the vault and carve her way straight here. I've only just got you back. I can't stand the thought of losing you again."

She pushed him away and slapped him. The noise echoed off the wooden walls and Ralphus looked at her in shock. "The man I love isn't this weak. You only have me back thanks to him. Regardless of what we stand to lose, we'll stand, and if need be, we'll fall with him."

Ralphus held his swiftly reddening cheek in shock. "I was only thinking about you. Like I have been since the moment I first saw you. I don't care about anything else in this world, my heart beats only for you."

"Then stand with me. Make me proud to be your wife!"

Ralphus's lip stiffened and he pulled his mask out of his robe and placed it on his face. "Then mark my words: Ralphus Obitus will make his final stand here. And even if the void itself should spill forth, I'll stand strong with you by my side until the darkness takes me!"

Damn, I'm in the middle of a shitstorm. Both from the north and from the...where the hell is the dark academy?

"Where exactly is the academy anyway?"

Ralphus began to point, "It's to the—"

"Here." Lang took my hand and placed it on her skin in the gap between her neck and her chest. "Take my soul for a moment; you can have what I can remember. It's fine as long as one of us knows."

Ralphus slowly removed his mask, displaying a murderous expression.

"I, uh, sorry Ralphus."

I went to stop her heart.

"Master, stop!"

"What is it Mors?"

"She's with child."

I pulled my hand back suddenly as Ralphus nodded.

I looked Lang in the eyes. "I can't do that. I think you know why."

Ralphus looked from me to her.

"No, why?"

"Aren't you missing something? Something that comes each month?"

She looked at me for a moment before understanding hit her and she squealed.

Wait a minute, I can only consume from the beginning to current. That could have been bad, even if she wasn't pregnant. Thank you, Mors.

"No problem Master."

Ralphus blinked several times, not sure of what was happening as Lang pulled him down, yanked off his mask and kissed him.

"Guess who's going to be a daddy?"

I raised my hand.

"Not you!"

I lowered my hand as Ralphus' eyes lit up.

"M-me?"

Languoria cried, "Yes!"

Ralphus's eyes misted over as he held her close.

"Maybe it really is best if the two of you went elsewhere."

Ralphus sat back up. "No. I've given my word a second time. I'll stay."

He held out his hand and I shook it.

"Alright, then we have more planning to do."

I called Red and Reginauld into the church. I hated to say it, but I wished Bob was there. Not that he would add anything useful, but he needed to know the situation.

We talked for some time while Ralphus brought everyone up to speed.

Reginauld leaned over the table. "I see, so then this Eunice is some sort of powerful sham— Pardon me, sir, but what are you doing?"

I set the half-finished doll on the table. "Do not worry about what's in my hands. Continue."

He turned his attention from me to Ralphus and Languoria, who was sitting on her husband's lap. "There are more chairs, would the lady perhaps like her own?"

Lang shot him a look that made him jerk back as if struck. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Very well, so we have a shaman to the northwest, and a dukedom in the northeast. And for the moment at least, the shaman is held in place while an elven cult sieges the forest. Do I have that correct?"

Ralphus nodded. "The cult of Rossereth also has a blood elemental. No amount of physical damage can kill that thing, and iron weapons will only make it stronger. It's entirely possible that Eunice has already gotten John's name out of Barz. I wasn't able to pry any more information out of anyone before I left, but it's likely she's already set something in motion."

"Ah, I've got it!"

All eyes turned to me. "It's done!"

I placed the doll on the table and Red picked it up with two fingers and scratched his chin. Everyone else just continued to stare.

"Uh, hmm."

Come on John, think! They obviously still believe you were talking about a plan, and not a doll. So say something!

I cleared my throat. "What if we take Therograd and convert its people into either zombies or my followers? We can also move most of the village there."

Red gently set the doll down. "That's good, my Lord, but it'll take us time to overtake something as large and fortified as a dukedom. It's meant to withstand invading armies, and as you've found here, people are rarely grateful to their conquerors."

"And zombies rarely last long against necromancers," Ralphus chimed in.

I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something obvious that I was missing. I didn't want to lose this place or move all my people again. This place is quiet and peaceful. It's the sort of place you would want to retire to, or at least it's becoming that. Not to mention all the work we've put in. We have the start of a farming community that could possibly put an end to the famine here. And now that the small game has returned and people aren't turning up their noses at eating rodents, we're doing better than expected.

When I looked back on it, though, I wondered just how much of this famine was caused by Fura's mother. From what I understood from absorbing her snakevines, her parasites probably only took maybe one in ten of the animals she sucked in, as smaller animals couldn't contain them, and larger animals fought and died before she could infect them, leaving only a corpse that she would lose control of once it was out of her warren...

"Fura's warren!"

They turned to me once more. "Since the spriggan died, Fura has had control over the place. To get in, it took the

combined efforts of me using a very costly barrier spell and Bob using a fully aligned fireball. Even then, if Liz hadn't used her ice to stop it from closing, there's no way we could have gotten in. And that's disregarding the fact that we never would have found it if I hadn't been pulled there by my followers."

Reginauld was the first to respond. "Yes, I believe we all remember the explosion and the tragedy that followed. Are you suggesting we all live down in that hall of horrors?"

"At least as a last-ditch effort. I'll talk to Fura; we may be able to move it here, or even create another one. But that would enable me to scout out Therograd while everyone else remained safe. There's still too much we don't know. Like what is this crusade? Why did the Duke leave, and most importantly, *where's Thads?*"

Reginauld sat back and Ralphus and Lang began whispering to each other. But it wasn't the usual lovey-dovey chatter. They both bore serious expressions that gradually turned grim.

"John, what do you think a crusade does?"

"In my previous world, it was a religious army that fought to kill or convert followers of another religion. Of course each religion had their own reasons for it, but they all were pointless in my opinion. Why?"

"Think carefully, who are you? And why is there suddenly a crusade?"

"Oh... Shit!" Thoughts rushed through my head, thoughts of my mates, and my daughters, facing the full might of a continent. My people burning and dying while religious bigots looked down on them.

Fernando came crashing through the doors with fangs bared, frothing at the mouth. I stood as the table fell forward and the chair crashed to the ground.

A series of small voices cried to me, "Jo...hn... Stop!"

The darkness hit me like a ton of bricks and I could feel it pulsing like a second heart. Something ate into me and

clawed to get out.

I won't let them have their way! I am he who is not! The last man. I will devour this world before I see that happen!

I heard a strange laughter... Was that me? My mind flashed to the heads still buried behind the smoke shack, and to the girls I couldn't save, their mangled bodies forever resting in a pit of filth.

This world... Why?

"Master!"

Calming effect!

I inhaled slowly, and as I exhaled I opened my eyes to see a room of shocked faces. Fernando stood at my side, his beady eyes darting from one person to another, terrified. He was panicked, ready to strike at anyone.

I looked down at my hands. Bone spikes had erupted from my arms, and my fingertips were replaced by sharp points.

I ran my tongue along my lips. They'd all but disappeared, replaced by jagged fangs that burst from a massive maw.

I closed my eyes again.

Calming effect!

I used fleshcrafting to return to my normal appearance. When I opened my eyes again, everyone was standing at least ten paces away. All of them looked at me with shock.

Red had taken a defensive stance and seemed ready to strike or defend at the drop of a hat.

I breathed out fog.

"I'm so fucking tired of being attacked. It seems like every time we find some peace, there's something looming on the other side waiting to rip it all away."

I picked up the table and looked back to my chair. It was broken.

"Reginauld, about those chairs you said we had more of..."

He blinked several times. "As you wish, sir."

I beckoned everyone to sit down again and gave Fernando a pat on the head to calm him.

Since I came to this world, it seemed like for each step forward there's a sharp fall backwards. Even when things seem ideal, there's always something. A wendigo, bandits, a spriggan.

"My goals have changed. I want to rip this shithole world apart—pick out all the maggots that feast on its rotten core and pour salt on its wounds."

I waited until everyone took their seats again and turned back to Ralphus.

"You said earlier that Theresa wiped out cults. Why isn't she after the cult of Rossereth? Why did she jump to me?"

Ralphus stroked his short beard for a moment and nodded to himself a few times. "When I think about it, it does seem odd. Her followers shun them, but she has never sent her paladins to strike out at them. As far as why you, maybe she thinks you're the bigger threat, one large enough to merit a crusade."

I grinned. "Then my next question is, how do I kill a goddess?"

Ralphus and Lang all balked at the question. Red simply smiled.

"W-well, the way *she* does it is to wipe out all the cult's followers, then destroy any texts, markings, and relics that belong to them. At the dark academy we have many relics from fallen gods. The book of souls was one such relic. I'm sure that Theresa's chosen would love to destroy them, but our barrier keeps them all at bay."

"You mentioned the cult of Rossereth had blocked your supply lines and will eventually starve you out, but if the academy is so old, and if everyone is so smart there, then why don't you have farms? Livestock?"

"The downside of the barrier: very little sunlight enters. Plants don't grow well, and as far as animals, yes, we have some. But not enough to feed everyone all the time. We

have to trade for produce. Though mostly we trade for wheat, barley, and hops."

"So people have never tried to besiege you before?"

"Not for many years, certainly not in my lifetime. We have magic and an undead army. Not to mention that more than a few of the noble houses send their heirs to learn our magic. Soul magic is a great way to make a normal man into a powerful mage even if he doesn't have mana of his own. In fact, other than you and the people you've altered, I doubt there's even a handful of mages in the kingdom who don't rely on souls."

I nodded, though I only understood part of that.

"So why is the cult a threat? Couldn't the academy just charge out with all their might and put them down?"

"Of course, but Eunice is too wrapped up in torturing Barz to order it. Not to mention that they have a blood elemental and magic of their own. It wouldn't be an easy fight without Eunice."

"I feel like we're going in circles."

Ralphus nodded.

"Let's table this for now and move onto keeping our people safe and killing Theresa."

Ralphus shook his head again.

"What?"

"You understand that almost the entire kingdom worships her? What you're talking about isn't just fighting a few warriors and priests. It's wholesale murder, on a scale that would turn this continent into a graveyard."

"What happened to Rossereth?"

"No one knows. One day all the elves were gone, and the name Theresa came out."

"Maybe my views are different as an outsider, but to me, that sounds like someone wiped out Rossereth's core followers and converted the rest by using similar scripture. They probably capitalized on the feelings of abandonment people had and provided them with an alternative."

"Yes! That could be! But I don't see your point."

"I'll kill when I need to and convert whenever possible. After all, I have one advantage she doesn't. I'm here, in the flesh. People can see me, they can talk directly to me, and they can reach out to me."

"But unlike her, you can't be in all places at once."

"True... But as I take one place, then another, my name will spread, though I know not how I will be perceived. Eventually I will crush her and any other force that conspires against me until they learn to let me and mine live in peace!"

I was reminded of a phrase: Never poke a sleeping dragon. I never had any ill will towards her and her followers, but if she intended to wipe me out along with everyone I care about, then she and everything she stands for must fall.

I felt my rage building again. That's probably why the dark god hates other gods. They're like petty gossipers or world leaders that make everyone else do their dirty work. She attacks me for what? Because I'm not her, and I don't follow her. I now understood the rage I felt when I looked at her torn portrait earlier. It was the dark god's wrath. But what can she hope to accomplish? If she kills me, it's all over for everyone. Surely a goddess would know that. They can't exist without the dark god, and the dark god's not something you can kill, even if I am.

"Master?"

I closed my eyes. "Yes, Mors?"

"Are you sure you should declare war on a kingdom?"

"The kingdom has already declared war on me. If I defend, I'm sure to be overrun by sheer numbers. You remember what happened with just one legion of the Duke's troops earlier. Imagine that times a hundred, maybe even a thousand. If I just stay here with my head in the sand, then I'll surely lose."

"But why are you so set on going to Therograd?"

"Because—"

"It's just revenge!"

"I can't let what that bastard did slide. And after coming here, I'm sure the Duke played a part in it as well. They deserve to—"

"They're not there... All you'll accomplish is what? Taking a city they've abandoned?"

"You can't know that. Thads may still be there, hiding like a rat."

"Which is more important, revenge or your people? Go to the Academy, and the followers of Rossereth or even Eunice might become allies. We can't fight an army alone!"

"You remember what we saw in those camps! Remember when Threscia told us what he did to her, to my daughters, to Liz. They're all broken; sometimes I feel them pulling me in their sleep. They smile and they try not to think about it, but they're scarred for the rest of their lives. He took something from them that they can never get back, and they're only a handful of the people he hurt. I would gladly face an army if it meant putting him down!"

Mors appeared in front of me with a sad expression. "Stop... You need to think. Where would you hide if you were him and someone like you was hunting you down?"

"...The crusade."

She nodded solemnly.

"Then he's all but untouchable at the moment..."

What's worse than a needle in a haystack? A needle in a needle stack.

I opened my eyes to see everyone looking at me with annoyance.

"Mors, we have to find a way to let you come out every now and then. Otherwise I look like I'm narcoleptic."

"You don't have to close your eyes, Master."

"I know that, but it helps me focus on what you're saying if I can see you."

I cleared my throat. "I've thought on it. Ralphus."

"Yes."

"I know you just came from the academy, but we'll need to go back. For now I'll abandon my plans to go to Therograd. We need allies, be it the cult or the academy."

Lang had an agonized look somewhere between pain and determination. "But he's going to be a father soon and—"

"So will I," I interrupted her. "Twice over. But if I have any chance of ever seeing my children grow up, we have to do something. We need allies, at almost any cost. I will go, with or without him."

Ralphus cracked his fingers one by one. "I'll do it. You're the dark god. My ancestors would curse me for betraying you if I didn't. But there are no allies there. Eunice detests anyone with more power than her, and if she finds out you're a flesh golem she won't hesitate to exploit your weaknesses. And the cult of Rossereth will attack anyone on sight. I've never seen a match between a blood elemental and a high-level flesh golem, but he has no physical weakness, and you have a soul prison. He will eventually win."

"Mors, I'm fleshcrafting a tiny you in my palm. It'll still be attached to me, so you can still police the souls. I'll give it its own air supply and vocal cords. Please speak to everyone."

The figure in my hand stirred and promptly covered itself.

Languoria quickly covered Ralphus's eyes, and Red leaned in.

"Master! Did you have to make it anatomically correct?"

"Ah..."

I removed the anatomical parts.

She slowly uncovered herself as her small purple eyes went from one person to the next. She greeted each in kind, and all but Ralphus remembered her from their time in my soul prison. "So, it sounds like our first obstacle will be the blood elemental."

Ralphus nodded.

Mors closed her eyes for a moment. "According to the knowledge of a former cultist from a few centuries ago, blood elementals do have weaknesses. Water magic can dilute them and cause them to lose their cohesion. Ice magic can freeze them and prevent them from moving, and fire magic can boil them away to nothing."

Hmm, I'm also weak to ice and fire.

"Yes, like you. But luckily we have Liz. There's no doubt that she can neutralize it."

Damnit, Mors. Don't go announcing my weakness!

"Ralphus and Lang already know. And Reginauld and Red are as loyal as anyone can be."

I just nodded as Red laughed. "So these are your brains. It's hard to tell who is whose master."

The rest laughed.

Is that really how it is?

Mors blushed for a moment.

"It's still a compliment, as I'm half you."

Ah, that's true.

They laughed again.

Oh, right, they can hear you now.

She gave me an apologetic look.

Red slammed his hand down on the table, snapping one of its legs.

"Gods, goddesses, none of that matters! A person is only as good as their honor, no matter who they worship. John has honor. We will not lose, be it to an army, a cult, or a bunch of weak-bodied magic users. I have witnessed firsthand how he works, and as long as we move with intelligence and strength, we will win!"

But you had honor, and I had to bring you back. No, to deal with snakes one must be a dragon, and to deal with dragons one must be prepared to die.

I turned back to Ralphus, "Maybe we could leverage the cult to improve negotiations with Eunice."

Ralphus leaned forward on the table, causing it to shoot up and smack Reginauld in the chin.

He looked around and I pretended not to notice.

"Eunice wouldn't care if the crusade itself was upon her. She's confident she'll obtain lichhood, and after that, food won't matter. She'll just sit behind her barrier and only fight the battles she's sure to win."

"But with you there, we can enter the academy."

"At most, I can only take one more person. That's how the barrier works. Any number can exit, but only two can come back in at a time, and that's only if we're not ambushed before we reach the doors by Eunice. If she finds out I ran out, she'll probably revoke my privileges, and even if she didn't, I could only take you. Not an army, and not you and Liz. We'll have to negotiate with the cult, and you'll have to leave everyone else outside if you want to get in."

"Calm down, Master! Liz can take care of herself."

I know, but I still worry. To me she's not just a mage, she's someone I care about.

I tapped the table, being careful not to hit Reginauld in the face again. "So, we'll need to plan to take down Eunice if we hope to get the academy's support."

Ralphus let out a long sigh. "She's not that easy to put down. Years ago, before I was born, it was rumored that she and Barz had a thing going. Her ego caused him to reject her, and eventually the two of them fought. She won, and he resigned himself to study, but he wasn't the only one that happened to. She's challenged many, many, mages, and each time she won. Of course, that was before she had access to a vault full of relics. Fighting her now would be like fighting the combined power of dozens of failed deities. For you, it might be suicide."

I thought for a moment before responding. "Is she popular? I mean, does she have a lot of support within the academy?"

"Not per se, but for most of us she's always been the one in charge. We've all grown up on stories of her. It's not likely you'd find anyone to openly oppose her."

"Let's worry about that later. For now, we need to make peace with the cult, then once I'm inside I'll see what I can do."

Mors nodded her approval.

We talked for an hour or so more, then everyone went their separate ways, each of us wearing a troubled expression.

I returned my hand to its normal state.

"Mors, why didn't you think of that?"

"Of what Master?"

"Fleshcrafting a smaller version of you on me."

"Well, it's a little strange. I felt too exposed, and it was harder to focus on controlling the souls."

"So does that mean I can't just fleshcraft a life-sized version of you and..."

"No, Master, I wouldn't be able to keep focus, especially not for what you want to do."

I hung my head. "Ah."

"What is it, Master?"

"Reginauld forgot the doll. I guess I'll give it to him tomorrow. For tonight I think we all need rest. We should enjoy what little time we have before everything goes sideways."

She smiled sadly as I walked into the bedroom.

I fell asleep again before anyone else came.

I dreamed of Mors. She wore latex thigh highs and long gloves, nothing else. I was tied to a wooden X and she forced me to come inside her over and over again. Sometimes in her mouth, sometimes in both her holes.

Often she would drag it out making me beg as my orgasm slowly built. She would deny me until I begged her for relief only to be denied until I came uncontrollably. She lapped it up and I felt a sudden warmth.

I opened my eyes to see Leera riding me as Fura sucked me. I enjoyed each of the different feelings as I pulled Leera down and bit her neck. She cried out in pleasure as I buried myself deep inside her and shot my seed.

Fura gagged as it was more than she could swallow and let it spray out covering her and Leera in a thick white rain.

Leera raised up and I could see I was buried deep in her rear entrance. Fura held one of my slick twins between her ample breasts as she moved her mouth to pleasure Leera who arched her back and pressed herself against me.

I reached forward and held her waiting breasts as I continued to thrust into her. Fura took me into her mouth again and I moaned. The others stirred and looked at me as if waiting their turn.

Fura raised Leera's legs and I felt myself enter her rear entrance as well. The two of them began to grind against each other and I could feel their muscles begin to contract around me, squeezing my base.

I fought my urge to finish as the two of them began kissing. I thrust up against them and they began to moan as Liz and Nex licked my chest, lingering on my nipples. Lina sat on my face and I used my tongue to enter her.

I raised my hands up and Liz and Nex arched against me. I felt their warmth as I pushed my fingers inside and massaged them. My thumbs tracing small circles along their swollen maidenheads.

I thrust up one final time as Fura, then Leera cried out. I filled them with everything I had and they fell against me as the others waited their turn.

We continued to mate for the next few hours and I poured everything I had into each of them. They were my mates and I made sure they felt loved.

By the end I collapsed and held them close, not sure what was a dream and what was reality.

Spent, I slept a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 8

I woke my mates and explained everything about the crusade and about the situation with the cult at the dark academy.

Liz's ears perked up at the mention of the cult of Rossereth, and rage stained her delicate features when I mentioned the blood elemental.

She had told me about the cult some time ago and about a person named Eva, but she never went into any detail until now.

The story she told was riddled with deceit and full of horrors. It was a story about a woman named Eva and how she raised children to be sacrifices once they came of age. It told of how Liz lost everyone she cared about one after another, and of a desperate escape. She still regrets that she couldn't take all the others with her.

The fact that Eva now had a blood elemental could only mean one thing: Everyone Liz knew was dead, and if she hadn't gotten away, then she too would be part of that blood elemental.

My pulse was racing as I replayed her story in my mind. It's true I didn't even know her then, but someone had wanted to kill the woman that would eventually bring joy to my life. They wanted to use her for...what? Some sort of sacrifice?

And now I was entertaining thoughts of making an alliance with them, with that very person, and that unknown thing they worshipped.

I hugged her and was followed by Nex, then Lina, Leera, and even Fura. "Why haven't you told any of us about this?"

"Because everything about my life has been terrible and I don't want to be pitied. You made me strong, and I don't want to lose that feeling by dredging up the past."

"But we could have shut them down!"

"There's no way to do that... No one but she knows where they all are."

Nex buried her face in Liz's shoulder. "You know you are like a sister to me. We are bound by the blood of the battlefield! There are no secrets between sisters." Tears filled Nex's eyes as she continued. "They hurt you, they killed your friends, so now—" she grabbed my harness and pulled me down. "—he will hurt them."

I could only nod. After hearing this, I cannot, I will not, ally with them.

The necromancers weren't the best option, either. Eunice was torturing Barzealis; I didn't know him well, but he was like a mentor to Ralphus.

"I guess this means we're killing a cult and usurping an old woman's throne."

I kissed Nex on the forehead and moved up to kiss Liz, but her eyes told me that now wasn't the time. All I could do was hold her close and make a promise to myself that I would help her kill her ghosts. *These women, my mates, mean everything to me. I can't fail, because if I do, then they'll be the ones to pay the price.*

I separated from the hug and pulled Fura to the side.

"I need you to move your warren here or create a new one."

She looked at me in confusion. "It would be easier to create one, but it will take time."

"Please... Things are going to get bad soon. Just focus on making it large enough for our people. We don't need all the passageways and random walls."

She frowned and nodded.

It was a lot to ask on such short notice, but I could only hope she has the time to finish it before we need it.

I said my goodbyes and headed for the door. A hand grabbed mine and I looked down to see Lina.

"You'll miss our child's birth."

I picked her up and held her in my arms. "I'm sorry, but if Eunice gets out before we get there, then we might lose our advantage. Besides, there's still time before he hatches. I'll make it back before then."

Her small mouth dropped open. *Oh shit, I said it, didn't I?*

"Er, or she..."

She raised an eyebrow and rubbed her stomach. "Just for that I'm naming him Bob."

"Please don't, isn't one Bob enough?"

She nodded and I sat her down as I opened the church doors. "See, you summoned him."

I recognized the beastly back of Bob as he sat on the stairs talking to a strange person.

"They said The Aristocrats!... The Aristocrats!... Ah, maybe ya missed somethin'; I'll start it over from the beginning'."

"Bob!"

"Boss!"

"Bob!"

"Quenelia!"

"..."

"Who?"

There were a series of pops and cracks as she stood. "Oh, pardon me young man, my name is Quenelia. I'm your sacrifice..."

She faced me and lowered her hood. There was a red gleam that caused me to jump back and shield Lina.

"What the fu—"

Bob shrugged. "Yeah, she does that."

"Ooh, pardons again, sonny. I thought I could be of some help, but it appears you already have a seer."

"A seer?"

"Yeah, the old bat can see the future or somethin'... So that's why she didn't laugh."

We both just stared at him.

"The Aristocrats!" he said while doing jazz hands.

"You poor dear, it must have been rough." I took her arm and walked her into the church.

"If you're a seer, then you already know I'm not going to sacrifice you. But you can't stay human..."

I looked her over again. *Was* she human? Her face was so scarred, she looked worse than me in ghoulish form. Was she undead? She was kinda like a hagraven; maybe she would approve of becoming one.

"Oh, I've seen those looks before. Yes, I'm human. Yes, I'm a lady. And no, I'm not looking to court you."

"...Well, two out of three isn't bad."

She laughed. "Which two?"

"Well, the courting is obviously one of them," I joked back.

I used fleshcrafting on her as I guided her over to a pew. She had a long list of health problems. At this rate she could drop dead at any moment.

"Did Bob tell you about my abilities?"

She blushed. "Yes, and I told you I'm not looking to court you."

"...Not those abilities."

"Then no, but I'm aware of all the same. Do what you need to; I'll leave it up to you."

"This'll be easier if I stop your heart first. That way I can also teach you my language. If I don't do it this way, the pain may very well kill you given your heart's present condition."

She smiled and nodded. "I've been waiting for this day my entire life—the day I break free of this wretched human shell."

"It's not that I disagree, but what makes you say that?"

She turned a black eye in my direction. "I'm a seer. More than anyone, I know what humans are capable of... When I was just a girl, maybe sixteen, I saw my death for the first time. They planned to rape me and leave me to die. I boiled a pot of water and poured it over my face. The pain was immense, but so was my resolve, and when they came looking for the bonny lass with the raven locks, all they found was a scab-faced mummy. That was the first time. There've been many since, young one, but I'll not bore you with them now. Get to it, you've somewhere to be."

There was power in her words, though she spoke softly. I had questions to ask her, not the least of which was who was this other seer in my midst, but she was right. I did have somewhere to be.

"And sonny, aren't you forgetting something important?"

I just looked at her.

She shook her head, "Maybe it's better this way, but don't let guilt hold you back. There are still things you need to do, or the puzzle will never be complete, and the pieces of your future will fall apart."

I tilted my head. *Maybe she's just crazy.*

"No beak please, the food is the only thing I ever enjoyed about being human."

Then again, how'd she know what I was going to do?

"Very well. You may tell Mors any modifications you would prefer."

She took my hand and guided it to her chest.

I stopped her heart and used soul steal.

"Alright, Mors, one crow-woman. Nothing sexual here. I have a feeling she has no desire to have a family."

We began. Her bones were already light and brittle. I made them lighter still but more durable. I replaced her hair with mana-gathering feathers. Mors worked to restore her face and she began to resemble someone, but I couldn't quite place who.

She had gaunt features and a large nose that looked charming when paired with her prominent eyebrows and stark cheeks. As Mors finished, I made her lips black and darkened the skin around her eyes, streaking it downwards.

"Master..."

"Hmm?"

"Isn't that a bit much?"

"Nope."

"I mean... I think you're getting your crows confused."

"Ah..."

I undid the streaks and turned to her back, starting on the wings.

Shit, I don't have enough skin or muscle for wings.

I thought briefly about calling Fernando, but he was just starting to recover from the town meeting.

"Bob?"

"What can I do ya for, Boss?"

"Go get me a bear or whatever you can find. I need skin, bone, and muscle."

"Gotcha."

There was a gust of wind and he was gone. A few moments passed and he reappeared, dropping something in front of me.

"...Headwound!?"

The old gob stood and looked around in confusion. "What the void... Oh."

"He's gonna use ya for parts, old-timer."

The old gob looked me over from head to toe. "Oh, alright then. He reminds me of that other fella. The one with all the dongs, what was his name again?"

"No, no I'm not. Bob, please return him to wherever you found him."

"No, please don't go out of your way for me." The old gob slapped his chest and laid down.

"Alright, I'm ready."

I placed my hand on his head and mended his most recent injuries; as expected, a dagger to the brain doesn't heal overnight.

"Come on, Bob." I made a dismissive gesture.

Bob shrugged and disappeared again, this time bringing a very confused Fernando and a couple of partially tanned hides.

"Close enough."

I really wanted to give Fernando a break, but I have to work with what I have, and he was doing better than I thought.

I turned back to the old woman, Quenelia, I think her name was, and in the course of an hour I had her new body finished.

I opened the soul screen and showed it to her. She had lithe frame and dangerous talons for hands. Her wingspan was huge, and feathers covered most of her body. She looked fierce and inhuman, just like she requested. I wondered if she could actually fly, but I didn't have time to wait and see.

"It's exactly as I saw it. Yes, I will fly. And yes, Lina will be happy to have someone to fly with, but that won't be for a few months. Of course it may not be at all, depending on you."

Shivers ran down my spine. "I never—"

"No, you didn't introduce me yet. But still, I know her name, and everyone else's. Do you believe me yet?"

So this wasn't some parlor trick, or some vague magic. It was precise enough to know the names of my mates. That's not a power to trifle with. If she wanted to, she could manipulate everything, change whatever she wanted and feasibly kill anyone with subtlety. *It's possible that whatever she had intended has already happened and we're all doomed... No, I'm not sure I want this person around.*

The darkness whirled around and enveloped her in a sphere. I watched in shock as it slowly dripped away,

revealing a younger version of her.

It embraced me, and I only felt warmth. It seemed to speak to me.

"She has been my follower her entire life. She is a priestess!"

I looked at her in disbelief. I knew that the dark god was a god, but somehow I never thought that there may already be clergy.

"To follow me is to suffer. To become a priestess is to understand that suffering and teach it to others..."

"Why didn't I detect her?"

"She did not want to be found yet. She waited and lined things up to come to this very moment."

As I stared at her, there was another red gleam, but this time it was slower. I saw her eyes flash red and for an instant she was beautiful to me.

Her face and upper body were still burned and covered in a web of scars, but her unkempt hair flowed freely. There wasn't any sign of malice, or hatred towards me; instead I felt her strength.

Her scars became charming as I realized what sort of resolve lay behind them—the willpower it would take to do something like that. The fact that even with her abilities she couldn't find another way around it. She was a survivor in a world like this. That's like beating a roguelike on hardcore difficulty.

I smiled. "Welcome to new game plus!"

I made some last-minute tweaks to her body and infused her soul into it.

She sat up and looked at me before covering her chest and legs.

"This wasn't what you showed me!"

"So, it isn't absolute?"

"Get me my robe!"

I gave her robe to her, but she couldn't put it on because of her wings.

"Here, let me modify it so you--"

She ripped out the back with her talons and carefully slipped her wings through it.

She sat back down and glared at me.

"I didn't want to be ogled. You shouldn't have added...these." She grabbed her chest. "And I'll lose my ability if you..." Her mouth hung open and she blushed. "So that's why I couldn't see this. I'll need to train your other seer quickly. But you have to go. Now!"

I'm guessing that she still has some limitations on what she can see. Some rules that are known only to her, and I violated them.

"I'm sorry about that. It's just that there was a moment there, that you looked beautiful. Completely at my mercy as a soul inside me, yet still standing strong, just as you did in life. I didn't want to rob you of the chance to have a happier one this time."

"Oh no, I don't have to be a seer to know where this leads. Go! I need my gift to last a little longer."

I cocked my head. "So that's why you couldn't see this."

She blushed again and made a shooing motion. "Just get outta here!"

So it's tied to her emotions. I felt it a little when she was inside me. She can't sense anything about herself or those she shares a bond with except death. Does that mean she won't share a bond with Lina? Is that why she could see them flying together? Well, I guess most people don't get along that quickly...

And Lina's already hugging her. Yep, not timid anymore.

I said my second round of goodbyes as Bob, Liz, Fernando and I made our way out.

"So, ya couldn't resist makin'er sexy, eh?" Bob laughed.

"..."

Liz shook her head and shot me a look.

"It's, uh... I thought she deserved it. She never really got to experience anything like that the first time, so—"

"So, ya thought ya'd make her sexy and heal her with the mystic powers of yer dongs?" Bob turned his attention to Liz. "Well, missy, did it work for you?"

Liz blushed.

Bob burst out in laughter. "Ah, it did! I guess that would make ya feel all warm and gooey inside. And that's..." He started counting on his fingers. "Pentably true for you. I bet he—"

I punched him.

"Please, sir, may I have another?"

I regretted punching him.

He smiled slowly. "You're tearing me apart, Lisa!"

I froze. No... It's not possible.

I looked into his crimson eyes in astonishment. He peered back, not looking away as the tension grew between us. "You did set tha—"

He farted.

"...Alrighty then, I'll save that ass kicking for later."

He bit his lip and looked back at me. "Yeah? You can do more than just kick it, big boy!"

Shit, I forgot who I was talking to.

Liz laughed.

"Keep laughing, girl, he may have ridden you last night, but today he's riding me!"

Liz's mouth dropped open and she turned her head to me slowly.

"He means literally; Fernando's too small now, and it would be a burden to you."

Bob laughed. "So yer riding Fernando now, too!"

"Goddammit Bob, not this again!"

He fluttered his eyelashes. "That's right, we've done it so many times now." He gasped in practiced exaggeration. "Does that mean you're getting tired of me?" He wiped a non-existent tear.

Liz began to blush. "I remember our first ride..."

"Those rides were not the same!"

She pointed at Bob's backside. "But he has a—"

"He wanted one so he could go fuck himself."

Oh, shit. There's something I hadn't considered.

"Bob, I don't want you to misunderstand this, but let me touch you for a moment."

"See, he can't keep his hands off me!"

"Just shut up and let me grab you."

He sat back on his haunches and covered himself with his arms. "Ah, you fiend! Fine, have yer way with me."

We'd gathered spectators again.

I sighed in frustration. "Oh, god."

"That's what ya said the last time!"

I placed my hand on him and used fleshcrafting.

"Dear, sweet baby Jesus..." I slowly removed my hand.

"What? Yer—"

"Bob... You're a mother-father."

"It's pronounced motherfu—"

"No, I mean you're pregnant."

Liz stopped walking and we all just stood there for a moment in silence.

Liz was the first to speak. "So, who's the father?"

Bob raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

"You know it's not me!"

Bob laughed. "Where's Maury when ya need 'im?"

Liz cocked an eyebrow. "Who's Maury?"

Bob threw his arm around her as we resumed walking. "I'll tell ya all about him, sister."

I explained the plan to Bob as we made a detour to the meat stall. Fernando was looking peckish, and I already knew Bob and Liz would require food on our trip.

The meat guy eyed me suspiciously. He had opted to become a merman, which told me that he was probably a fisherman originally. "You didn't bring the green girl with you, did you?"

"No, she's at home. But you really should set aside a bit of everything for her."

"No one gets special treatment here!"

I really meant it more for his health than anything.

I shrugged. "Well, have I ever taken any meat for myself from you?"

"No, not yet at least."

"Then give my share to her."

I ate whenever we were all together for meals. The rest of the time either Fernando or Lina would bring me the game they personally caught. For Fernando, I think it's because he thinks of me as his Queen, and for Lina, she just likes to show off. Even with all of Nex's group and the hunter-trappers scouring the forest for food, they both manage to pull in an impressive amount—though that may change now with my modifications to the others.

As the meat guy was bagging some food for our trip, I saw a familiar face chomping down on a charred bear shank.

"Belairia!"

She wiped the grease from her mouth and lunged at me, meat in hand.

I felt my vertebrae pop as she hugged me with everything she had, lifting me off the ground.

Bob raised an eyebrow. "Damn girl, if ya keep that up he's gonna pop! In both ways."

I hugged her back and she set me down.

She looked at us one after the other until she noticed Liz.

"Miss Liz, look at this!"

She pulled out a badly crumpled piece of parchment and pointed to a line of henscratch. "Look, here, did I get it right?"

I looked it over. It said, 'Hello, my name is Boogeria!' in Therossian.

Liz forced a smile. "Oh, almost. Did someone help you with this?"

"Yeah, sis did!"

Liz's eyebrow twitched. "Well, it may be better to ask someone else to help you next time."

"Is there something wrong with it?"

"It's slightly misspelled..."

Belairia laughed. "Ha, and sis thinks she's so smart! So what are you guys up to?"

I turned to Bob. "Don't—"

"I dunno yet. He hasn't told me nothin', and I'm fighting for two now."

"Ooh, can I come?"

"Maybe when yer older." Bob laughed.

"I turned seventeen a few days ago, I'm a grown woman now!"

She puffed out her chest and Bob licked his beastly lips.

"Yeah, some parts of ya are definitely mature."

"Hey, you bastard, that's my daughter!"

"So what, are ya callin' first dibs or somethin'?"

"What the hell's wrong with you? It's not like that!"

"Yer pants tell a different story!"

"That's not fair, she was hugging me and... You know my condition!"

"Hey, I'm not judgin'—you know what I was doin' in my past life."

"...She's been through enough. I would never touch any of them with that kind of intent."

"Eh, what about this one?" Bob said as he nodded at Liz.

The meat guy handed me a sack. "Oy, you lot take this drama somewhere else, there's a line!"

"Oh no, honey, I like a show with my meal!" Mark interrupted.

"Fuck you, Mark!"

"Now that is uncalled for." He took a bite of some barbecued meat. "Carry on."

"Baby cakes!" Bob hugged Mark. "The mean man tried ta hurt me!"

Mark threw down his meat. "Uh-uh. I know you didn't lay a finger on my man!"

Jesus, Mors, what the hell did you teach him?

"Don't blame me, it was in line with his personality."

Mark got in my face. "You no-hair-havin', mother-lovin' piece of S&M-harness-wearing, polygamist, two-timing, womanizing, gourd-throwin', no-good piece of shit!"

I panicked. "You're going to be a father!"

"Lyin'... Wait." He grabbed Bob's face and brought it to his. "Is that true?"

Bob fluttered his eyelashes. "Yeah, John's gonna be a daddy!"

Mark's natural green shifted to an angry red. "Fuckin' mate-stealin', spouse-impregnatin'... You just wait till Muffy finds out about this. Your ass is grass. I can't help you now!"

I pushed the bearded gob off of me. "He's joking! I don't know who the father is, but it's not me."

"Oh, so now you're gonna play it like that, huh. Gonna just drop your seed and not take credit for it." He hugged Bob close. "It's okay, sweetie, we don't need him. I'm more of a man than he'll ever be! We'll just—"

"No, dammit!" I activated life sense, soul steal and dark armor. "I. Did. Not. Fuck. Bob!"

Mark puffed up his chest. "What, you gonna hit me now, tough guy? Bring it on!"

I canceled all abilities. "Leera told me everything, and Bob's been through two bodies since then. I can't be the father!"

Mark deflated. "Muffy?"

"Or me." Bob shrugged.

Mark picked his meat up off the ground and dusted it off. "Fine, but I'm not letting you go alone. Regardless of who the father is, it's our child. And I'll protect it!"

"Oh! I'm going too!" Belairia gestured a cheers at Mark with her meat.

"Girl, I do not know you like that. Don't be bumping meat with me!"

"Come on, baby cakes. That's how we met!" Bob pulled Mark into an unnatural kiss given the difference in head size.

"Fine! You can come. I've seen you in action and know you can both take care of yourselves. But Belairia, are you sure? I won't be able to protect you, and if anything happened..."

"I'm still a virgin! Well, since you brought me back."

I coughed. "Wha—"

"I mean, no one here has been able to beat me yet! And for some reason they keep trying, especially when I stretch."

"Ah, okay. You had me worried there... Wait, why the hell are you stretching in public? No, never mind, just stop doing it."

"But that's part of Red's training. We start with the splits, then—"

The rest of what she was saying got blocked out by me picturing Red teaching people to do the splits. For some reason it was all to the tune of Olivia Newton John's "Physical."

Goddammit, now I'm seeing Red in spandex. "No!"

What the hell is Red doing anyway, making a bunch of monstrous Jean Claude van Dammes?

The four of them just stared at me.

Bob smiled, "Let's get physical, physical."

I could feel the blood drain from my face. What the hell was going on with Bob?

I looked at him as he continued the song. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

He shrugged. "Great minds."

We both laughed. Damn, I was starting to worry that Bob had become a psychic or... *I know! I know who the other seer is!*

"Bob... Can you tell the future?"

"Nah, I just lived this life a few times now. I've been on a loop since the ambush killed me. Of course it's me we're talkin' about here, so most of what I remember are the funny parts... And the sexy ones." Bob licked his lips slowly.

Yep, that sounds about right.

"You died? But I took your soul."

"Nah, that was just me and an older dead me. There've been a bunch of me's. Besides, when have ya ever been able to take the soul of somethin' livin' before?"

"I... I'm sorry Bob. I should've been paying attention, but instead both you and Lina..."

"Hey, I'm tha one with the big schnozz here, I shoulda picked up on it before you did. Ah, come 'ere, you!" Bob wrapped me in a big hug.

"...Can you take your hand off of my—"

"Nope, just enjoy it."

Before this moment I had never slapped a man.

"Ah, that's the spirit!" Bob smiled at me while holding Mark back.

"Now let's get Ralph and get outta here."

"Wait!" Belairia said as she stepped in front of me. "Before we go could you make me a weapon like you did for sis?"

I really didn't want to spend any more time here. There were consequences if I let Eunice get out, and probably worse ones if the cult managed to get in. But as I stared into her olive puppy-dog eyes, I felt my resolve crumble.

"Okay, fine. But I don't have any souls to infuse, so it'll have to be something simple."

"Yay!" She hugged me again.

I fleshcrafted my spine back together and looked around for supplies.

Most people seemed to like eating their lunch around the meat stall. It looked like it had become somewhat of a social place where people would mingle and talk about this or that.

I was happy to see that there were several wolfmen and mers talking happily with goblin men and women. If what Reginauld said was true, then at some point everyone would divide up and form clans, but for now everyone seemed happy to be around everyone else.

I saw an old gob toss a large bone into a barrel. When I looked inside, there were plenty of discarded bones that I could use.

Given that Reginauld had taught her hand-to-hand, perhaps a hand weapon would work best for her. Maybe some knucks, or a spiked bone gauntlet?

No, better avoid spikes; I'd have to fix them when they broke off, and if they struck steel that was a certainty.

I know!

"Mors, let's make tanfas. They're simple, and she should have no trouble blocking steel if we reinforce them."

"I agree, Master!"

I reached in and with Mors's help crafted two tanfas. I made them dense and hardened with enamel.

I handed them to Belairia and she frowned.

"I use these in both hands?"

"Yeah, they should suit your fighting style."

She punched one into the ground and it shattered. She hung her head and looked at me pleadingly. "I'm sorry, you went through all that trouble, but these aren't what I want."

I just blinked at her for a while. I use the same method for those that I used for my weapon and she just shattered it like it was made of glass.

"Mors, did we do something different when we rebuilt her?"

"Yes, I believe you were angry at the time and put a lot more effort into making her strong."

Ah, great, so I made a monster.

I patted her head. "It's okay, what were you thinking about for a weapon?"

She smiled back up at me, her eyes twinkling. "Something large and powerful!"

"Looks like we can add a stop at Blue's to our list."

We arrived at Blue's only a few moments later. The sleepy oni answered the door with a yawn.

He bowed. "How my I be of service, my Lord?"

"Belairia here has outgrown bone weaponry. I was hoping you had something of the two-handed variety here."

He scratched his head for a moment before sleepily rooting through a large pile of steel.

He presented a few different options: a rusty zweihander, a large ornate staff, and a long-broken cudgel.

"These are all I have. I've been meaning to fix them but've been too busy."

Belairia picked each one up before noticing a large axe head on the bench. "What about that?"

Blue nodded. "Good eye, I was making that for myself, but no wooden handle will support its weight. I'll have to smelt something for it."

I picked up the long, broken cudgel and placed it under the giant axe. I used the bone from earlier and condensed it around both pieces, this time as densely as possible. If its only purpose is to hold two things together, then it should be fine. It's stronger than wood at least.

"There we go, is it alright if she borrows it for a while? When we get back I'll remove the bone and you can finish it."

He frowned. "I don't see a problem with that, but how can you expect her to—"

Belairia picked it up with one hand and tossed it up a few times to get a feel for the balance.

"Never mind. She can borrow it, just try to return it in one piece."

I thought about reminding him that it wasn't in one piece when we got here, but I could tell he hadn't woken up yet.

We thanked him and left. Belairia grinned from ear to ear as she hugged her new toy. *It's a good thing that Blue didn't sharpen it yet, or I'd be mending her arms.*

We entered the old courthouse where Languoria and Ralphus had a room.

As we approached we heard their voices.

"Are you going to take it?"

"Yes, Mistress!"

"Who does this belong to?"

"It's yours, Mistress!"

What followed were a series of grunts ending in a feeble moan.

"I think you broke it!"

"Just ask John to fix it."

"How the hell do I explain this? I'd be mortified!"

"Want me to kiss it and make it better?"

"...Yes, please."

We sat down in the central room to wait for them to finish.

Liz was blushing. So this was where she'd been getting her new dirty talk from. Well, I can't complain.

Wait, where did Bob and Mark go? No, best not to think about it.

I watched Belairia set her ax down and shift uncomfortably in her seat.

This must be strange for her. I needed to get her mind off of it.

"Liz, why don't you show us your chants chart?"

Her eyes lit up. "Well, it's not entirely finished ye..." She cut off the end of her sentence when she saw Belairia take interest.

"Come on, it'll help pass the time."

She made a sideways head nod towards Belairia and gave me the quit it gesture but it was too late.

"Please Miss Liz?"

"I keep telling you kids it's Mrs. So...um, because of that, no. Not today."

Belairia kept pleading and Liz broke down. "Okay, but outside this time!"

The two of them left, leaving me alone with Belairia's axe. I picked it up and felt the weight. It's definitely top heavy, but—

There was a loud boom from outside.

I ran to the door and called out for Liz and Belairia. *Shit, am I too late!? Are we under attack?*

As the dust cleared I saw a blackened but intact Liz standing beside a dirty Belairia.

Bob and Mark came running from around the corner, both wiping their mouths.

"Just what the hell happened here?"

I grabbed Belairia's hand. It was badly burned all the way to her elbow.

"I'm sorry, kiddo, but you're gonna need a new arm."

I used pheromones and Fernando came skittering over.

I used fleshcrafting to sever her old arm, which Fernando promptly started eating, and grafted on a new one for her from his excess.

She flexed it a few times as she laughed and wiped the dirt from her face. "How many is that now? Five, or seven?"

"What!?"

"Arms you've made me? Five or Seven?"

"Don't..."

Her eyes misted over, and I held her. "It's okay, see, everything's fine."

I squeezed her hand as Liz hugged her from behind.

"You're okay, everyone's okay."

Bob appeared in front of her with a gust of wind that blew some of the dirt from her hair. "Damn, girly, and here I thought Mark knew how to blow something! That's amazin'!"

She looked up at him as I dusted her off. "I guess so, if you want to blow everybody up."

I ruffled her hair, singed though it was, and fleshcrafted the burned bits off. "It's better to lose an arm than to die by the hands of another. That was quite an attack; I don't want you to use it, but if you should have to it's still good to have."

"Attack... Right." She laughed.

I finished mending her minor injuries and fleshcrafted her some new eyebrows.

Liz gave me an apologetic look as I pulled her to the side.

"What happened?"

"Level one ignite."

I thought back to when I taught her dark tentacles and it clicked.

"She's a channeler like her old man, but she doesn't know how to hold anything back."

I watched as she began to breathe heavily and caught her as she fell. I used mana transfer and gave her five-hundred mana.

Liz produced some water and began wiping Belairia's face clean. "I'm sorry, John, this happened before, but it wasn't this bad."

"She'll be alright, and there was no way you could know. Her affinity for darkness is probably the only reason the tentacles don't drain her."

Liz shook her head. "Still, this happened because she didn't get the chant right. In the end it still rests on me as her teacher."

"No, she's mine. I've been neglecting everybody for a while now. I should have been teaching her. She needs to learn from a channeler, and I don't see anyone else around."

Bob cleared his throat. "Eh hmm, ya got one here, Boss."

"I knew 'I'm firin' mah balls' wasn't a chant."

Mark chimed in, "Pfft, I coulda told you that, he says it all the time, and I haven't caught fire yet."

Bob put his arm around Mark. "Oh, baby cakes, yer definitely flaming."

"Uh huh, that's rich comin' from you, you old queen."

Bob looked at me. "There's only one queen here."

"Shut the hell up, I'm only a queen to Fernando for bug reasons."

"You keep tellin' yourself that, honey," Mark snarked.

I was seriously questioning taking Mark along now. I didn't think I could deal with him and Bob on a long trip.

"Hey Mark, do you like birds?"

"Of course, with their little wings and all the colors they —"

I flipped him off.

Bob erupted in laughter and Mark looked dumbfounded.

I guess there are advantages to being in a world where no one knows the old jokes.

Ralphus and Languoria came shambling out the door. Both were covered in sweat.

Ralphus looked at Belairia in my arms. "Is everything alright!?"

"Yeah, she's fine. She just depleted her mana trying to perform ignite."

"Ig-ignite?" Ralphus looked at the scorched earth and Liz's dirt-covered body. "By the void, how could that be?!"

"John's daughters are...unique students," Languoria replied as she hugged herself close to him.

Bob laughed. "OP! Everyone John likes is OP."

"Shut up, you prime example."

"Aww, that means ya like me." Bob batted his eyelashes.

Liz cocked her head and seemed to be contemplating something. "Now that you mention it, it's true, all of us are stronger than everyone else..." She glared at me with her singed eyebrows. "And Wendy's mom looked pretty strong the last time she walked her here for lessons."

I averted my eyes.

Bob whooped. "Ahh! Busted!"

"I never laid hands on... Well, I did but... Shit, I can't talk my way out of this, can I?"

Liz grabbed me by my harness and began pulling me into the school building. I gently laid Belairia's head down as I was dragged inside.

"You're going to finish what we started yesterday!"

A few minutes later Liz was satisfied, but I was left wanting more.

"So you're not going to let me finish?"

She tucked the twins back into their prison and gave them a pat. "Nope!"

"Then you realize I'm just going to be walking around with an uncomfortable bulge for the rest of the day."

She smiled wickedly. "Yep!"

"Shit."

We came back out as Belairia was starting to regain consciousness.

I sat her up and rubbed the back of her neck. "You feeling any better?"

She groggily tried to stand but fell back down.

"Whoa, take it easy," I stood in front of her and held out my hand.

She reached up and grabbed something else entirely with an iron grip and pulled herself up.

I inhaled deeply and mended the damages. *Why!? What does everybody have against the twins lately?*

Everyone stared with pained expressions, but no one said a word until Ralphus broke the silence.

"So, we should probably get going, huh?"

All I could do was nod as Languoria assaulted Ralphus with kisses and we headed to the edge of town.

"Alright, we have a few different options. Liz can carry one smaller person." I eyed Belairia. "Bob can carry pretty much everyone else. Fernando is a bit too small at the moment, but he can keep up just fine."

I hopped onto Bob's back without waiting for his schtick and pulled Mark and Ralphus up.

There were a few moments where Ralphus explained where we were going and then we were off.

Chapter 9

I checked my map as we went. We were headed for a spot to the northwest of the cave. It was in the same direction that Threscia's light was shining.

I don't know what this means, but it gives me a bad feeling. I know she knows she can call me if she only wishes me to be there, so at least I know she's not in any trouble. But this puts her dangerously close to the cult.

From what I remember, Marrow didn't have pointy ears, so what the hell's going on here?

"Ralphus, does the academy ever deal with any unsavory types like cutthroats?"

"Oh, all the time. Where do you think the parts shop gets half its supply? If they want a body to disappear then there's no better place."

"And the king just allows that to happen?"

"No, he has no say. We don't help them get the body to us, we just use what they bring."

My heart began racing. Threscia could be dead. Thoughts about her body being used for new flesh golems flashed through my mind and I breathed out a steady fog.

"Master?"

"Yes Mors."

"I'm sure she would call out to you if she was in danger."

My breathing returned to normal as Mark choked. "If you're going to do that, ride at the back." He turned his attention to Ralphus. "And you, creepy guy. Stop bumping into me!"

"How could I be bumping into you? I'm all the way back here."

"Well, something keeps poking my back!"

"Oh, sorry." Ralphus raised his robes.

"No, no no no, I know you are not doing this right now!"

"What?" Ralphus said as he brought out a Kris knife.

Mark and I both sighed in relief.

"You had us going there for a minute."

"What are you talking about?" He placed the knife into one of his sleeves.

Minutes passed, and Mark turned back again. "...You're still doing it."

Ralphus just shrugged and Mark scooted up closer to me. "You sure he can't ride that bug of yours?"

"I guess he cou—"

"How the fuck!?" Mark turned back. "That better be another knife!"

Ralphus raised his robes again and we looked away. "How'd you know?" He pulled a second, longer Kris blade from his robes and placed it in his other sleeve.

I looked back at him. "Just so this doesn't keep happening, that's all of them now, right?"

Ralphus raised an eyebrow. "A necromancer's robes contain his treasures. I'll not tell you the contents."

"I don't give a shit about your 'treasures.' Just keep them away from mine!" Mark said as he gave a dismissive gesture.

"Oh, you also store things? But how, you have no robes?"

Bob and I laughed as Mark gave us the stink eye.

We stopped a moment for Liz and Bob to rest and Fernando to bring us some food. I wanted to see if he'd gotten any smarter and decided to try a bit of an experiment. I ordered him not to use his venom on the animals he killed. This was a concept that went against his instincts.

I sat down next to Liz who was a picture of serenity. Though her true character is a vehement one, I know she loves me, and in times like this it's nice to just relax next to her.

I laid my head on her shoulder and she rubbed it as we reclined against a tree.

"That axe is about as heavy as her," she said as she gestured to Belairia.

"Yeah, but it's what she wanted, and she can handle it."

"Are you sure you're okay with taking her along? The cult is merciless to anyone who doesn't share their heredity."

"I've seen her fight. Though her organs were pierced and her endurance was low, she soldiered on and together with the rest drove back the spriggan. She's tenacious, and even if I had stopped her, I have a feeling she'd have come anyway. Besides, she's your daughter too now, and we need to raise her together."

Liz blushed and I kissed her on the cheek as Belairia walked over and plopped down in my lap.

"You're too old for that, young lady," Liz scolded.

"I deserve to be pampered too!" Belairia replied while sticking out her tongue.

She lay back into me and I ran my fingers through her thick hair.

She shivered and pressed her head back against me. We all rested there until Fernando returned with his catch.

He dropped a partially eaten rabbit at our feet and another by Bob, Mark and Ralphus. "Wait! Don't eat those yet." I checked each of them and he had managed to resist using his venom. But everyone still looked skeptical, so I broke out a charred bear brisket from our reserve and we ate together in the shade.

It's moments like this that I live for. Moments when we're all together and happy. Sometimes I wish the world would leave us alone and let us live in peace. But this isn't that sort of place is it? I'd never be able to fully relax and enjoy things without someone or something butting in and threatening to take it all away. At least not until there's only me and the people I care about. But how long will that be? Years, centuries, a millennium?

This just reminded me that I need to rid this world of its gods. I doubt any of them will let me rest. But first it's the people I need to change.

We resumed our trip until nightfall when we stopped in place not too far from Fura's tree, which still stood proud in

the far distance. That means the cave is about half a day's walk south of here. We were able to travel a lot faster without an army in tow.

We set up camp for the night. Bob was on first watch, followed by Ralphus, then me.

I lay with my eyes shut. Liz had cuddled up next to me and Belairia lay on the other side, cradling her axe like a teddy bear.

I should be content in this rare moment of peace, but the seer's words still troubled me. From what I could understand, she had warned me that if I let guilt get in my way, then something bad would befall us.

I went over the things I had to feel guilty about; it was a long list. But something stuck out in my mind. Caroline, the only one I could say that I murdered without cause.

I opened up the soul screen and stared at her name, not daring to open it.

She didn't deserve what I'd done to her. Sid, maybe, but her, she'd never wronged me.

I debated the consequences. If I talked to her, I would have to face up to my sins, but if I didn't then everyone might have to pay for them.

I laughed bitterly to myself as I hugged my mate and my daughter. *There's no choice here at all.*

I opened her soul screen and saw a woman with dirty blonde hair, wearing a Deadmau5 t-shirt and a pair of old sweats.

She looked at her hands and felt along her chest, searching for wounds until her attention finally rested on me.

"Who the fuck are you, and where am I?"

Oh, that's right, I don't look like myself anymore. I tried to imagine the overweight middle-aged man I used to be, and her eyes flashed in recognition.

"You!" She grimaced and clenched her fists as she ran at me.

I closed my eyes and prepared myself to take whatever she had to dish out, but nothing came.

I opened my eyes and looked at her. She just stood there, tears flowing down her face. "I don't know if I should kill you or thank you."

Questions flew through my head as she continued. "Why do you look so confused?"

"I...don't remember what happened."

"What are you, Captain Kirk?" She sighed. "Fine, I'll refresh your memory. You killed him."

"No, I'm sure I mended him. He'll survive."

She laughed bitterly as she wiped her tears. "Then I do hate you." She paused for a moment while she collected herself. "Yeah, I would say this is hell but he's not here."

She looked back at me like a person trying to explain how an engine works to an infant. "That night, I tried to kill myself. It wasn't the first time." She showed me her wrists and the scars that criss-crossed them. "But, judging from the fact that I'm here..." She stared into the infinite void that surrounded us. "It was the last."

She held out her hand and pushed my mouth closed. "Don't gawk like that, you'll catch flies."

I resumed my normal form and she looked me over. "Ah, so you weren't him."

"No, I was but I'm not anymore. It's complicated. Please! I need to know what happened!"

Her lips pursed together as she stared into my eyes. "You're pretty lame for a demon, you know that? You look like a dusty Mr. Clean."

I laughed. "Well, I try, did you know he had a mustache for a while?"

She laughed and wiped away a few more tears. "Now I know you're a liar. But I'll tell you everything. That's what I need to do to wrap this up, isn't it? I need to come clean, then I can pass on or whatever?"

I nodded. It wasn't the time for explanations yet, not until I had answers.

"Fine. That night, I'd had enough. The past few years I only stayed with him because I didn't want to get high alone and any decent guy would balk at the sight of a needle. But every now and then, especially when I talked with my mom, reality hit me. My father had died of cancer, and I missed seeing him that last time because I was too wasted to go."

She sat down on the floor and searched her pockets, coming up empty. I knew that gesture—I used to be a smoker myself. I thought about a pack of cowboy killers and handed her one. She lit it with jittering hands and took a long drag. "That night after my mother called to tell me he passed, I tried to leave him, but Sid blocked the door, so I got a knife. I knew he wasn't going to let me go because we were both fucked up and he didn't want any undue attention. He grabbed the knife and we struggled until I accidentally cut his hand. He backed off and I slit my wrists, yelling at him that if he didn't call the ambulance I would die."

"He..." Her lips curled into a snarl. "He got angry. He said that I wasn't allowed to leave him. That he owned me! He ripped the knife from my hands and the next thing I knew it was buried inside me..." More angry tears fell. "The thing I remember most is his crying face as he kept cutting me. He just kept repeating that I would never leave that place. I took out my cellphone as I lay there and called 911, but he kicked my phone away and screamed at me. The last thing I remember is you, or the person you claim to be, kicking down the door and running a long fucking sword through him." She blew out another long puff of smoke. "The sad part is that he was so wasted he probably didn't even feel it. Hell, I barely did."

She flicked the cigarette into the darkness and stood with her arms to the sky. "Alright, where's my light? At least this

way I can make it up to dad. Maybe meet Jimi Hendrix or Kurt Cobain, ask him what really happened."

After a few minutes her hands fell and she looked at the ground. "I'm not going to heaven, am I?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"Then..." She sat back down on the floor. "Hell?"

"No, not there either."

"Look, you son of a bitch, I've had a very rough night, so send me to wherever the hell I'm going so I can put all this shit behind me."

I laughed. "Maybe you should go back to when you said hell. The truth is, I took your soul because your body was dead when I regained control of mine. In the world I'm in now, I'm a part of what you see around you. It's a place where almost anything can and will kill you for no other reason than existing. But there's good news. You remember our neighbor, well my neighbor, the hairy guy?"

"Daughter-fucker?"

"Was I the only one who thought he was doing jumping jacks?"

"What are you, eleven? Anyone could guess what they were doing, hell sometimes they would narrate it loud enough to hear through the ceiling." She shivered. "God, that guy gave me the creeps, almost as much as you did. You know, you can always tell the ones that are gonna go postal. Why the hell did you think I was so nice to you all the time?"

"Ah... Well, he's here, though he does look a bit different now. Anyway, the other good news is that you can choose a body of your own."

She squinted at me. "A what? What are you on man, because I need some."

"I mean, literally, a body but you can't be human. Like for instance, I remember we talked about cats once, I could make you a cat-person."

I'd made multiple catgirls now. Mors and I could probably whip one up in no time.

She started laughing. "Why, so I could be like some of that nya-nya-weeaboo crap you blathered on about? You gonna give me blue hair and a tail, too?"

I took a deep breath. It's been a while since someone talked to me like this. I fought to stop myself from telling her to leave Felicia-Chan out of this; she was from a fighting game, not an anime, and the nya-nya stuff she was hearing was from a seizure-inducing music video that got stuck in my head, but that would just prove her point. Probably didn't help things that the vents in the bathroom were shared and I sang that song in the shower. Okay... I did the dance, too.

I shook my head. "Those damn apartments really did have thin walls. Also, speaking of blaring things, what the hell was with the techno all damn night?"

Her smile slowly vanished as she turned pale. "You got another cig?"

I handed her another one and lit it for her.

"Believe it or not I used to like that crap. That's how I met Sid, he had an extra ticket to a concert I wanted to go to and posted it online. I met him there. That was the first time I took X. I ended up staying at his place for a while and things went downhill from there. You know, I was in college believe it or not."

I nodded; I had long since learned that sometimes all a person needs is someone to listen to them. To share their burdens.

She took a long drag and continued. "Well, that all went to shit. Sid stopped working and started dealing. Some months we felt like we were rich, but that all went back into drugs, which went back into us. Sid was always messed up on something, so I was the one who worked. Every now and then I'd try to get him to straighten up and drop the habit, usually by threatening to leave him. Then depending on his

mood we'd have sex and he would promise to change, or he'd beat me. Whichever it was, the music hid what happened." She smiled wryly. "Except that last time, I guess you must have heard something."

A thought crossed my mind. Maybe it wasn't me who'd heard something.

"Caroline, are you religious?"

"Why, you gonna say you're an angel or something now?" She gestured around her. "Well, you're a little late."

"No, I just mean did you have a religion? Did you pray?"

"Oh Jesus, now you sound like my mom. No! Okay. I mean when I was a kid I went to church, but since then after spending time with Sid and becoming an addict I kinda lost faith."

"That night, when he hurt you, did you pray?"

"You're starting to freak me out a little man, but... You'll think I'm an idiot."

"No, please go on."

"When I was lying there, I imagined my funeral, my mother sitting alone having just lost my father, while Sid was shoving a needle in his arm and I... I wanted him dead. Then you were there, wearing only boxers and a helmet and Sid was stuck on the other end of that sword. There was something beautiful about it in a way. Like at least I got to see him get what he gave."

"Hey!" She put hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay, man? There's gunk coming out of your eyes."

"Sorry about that, it's just...I thought I killed you. I didn't remember what happened. I just woke up there with a bloody sword in my hands and police at the door. They shot me as I tried to make everything right. I barely had enough time to take your soul and mend Sid for a few seconds. But looking back I should have left him to die." I hugged her and she patted my back. "I'm sorry, if I'd known sooner, then you'd be alive and he'd be dead."

"Don't worry about it, big guy. You tried." She smiled up at me.

I'd always thought she was attractive, but the whole drugs and techno thing, along with our age difference, kept me from getting involved with her. If I'd only taken more interest in the people around me, maybe I could have saved her.

She broke the hug and looked at her cigarette. "These aren't real, are they?"

"No, sorry. Nothing's real here, except the darkness."

"Jesus, you sound like an emo kid. Hey, wipe that frown off your face! None of it is your fault. I could've left, I had plenty of warnings. Hell, even Sal, or I guess you're calling him Bob for some reason, warned me."

"Wait, his name was Sal? Somehow it fits. How'd he warn you?"

She laughed. "Well one time I saw him in the parking lot in, I shit you not, full drag."

I thought back on my short, fat, balding neighbor and tried to picture him in a dress... Nope, that was a bad idea.

She looked at my face. "Sorry for the visual, but I saw it in person. Anyway, he told me that if things looked bad, 'That boy ain't no good for me' and that I was a 'hot little number' and I could stay with him. Might I add that he was putting on lipstick and winking the entire time."

I broke down in laughter. All this weight I'd been carrying had been crushing me, and now I could let it all out. She joined in and we stood there smiling at each other for a while.

She wiped a tear from her eye. "You know, you've changed. You seem a little more reliable now. I'm almost tempted to trust you."

"Well, I've been through a lot since the last time you saw me—well, the time before the last time, at least."

Mors, let's show her the highlight reel of the past few months. No need for the dirty parts.

The darkness illuminated and some theater seats appeared behind us.

We spent the next few hours going over everything that had happened as my memories played out like a movie.

"Mors, why does it sound like it's narrated by Morgan Freeman?"

"Who the fuck is that!?"

"Oh, that's my soul fairy. Let logic pass you by, there isn't any here."

Mors appeared and bowed to us.

Caroline opened her mouth and pointed, then shook her head. I'm guessing that she's not questioning it anymore.

"Welcome, I'm Mors." Mors flew over and held out her little hand to Caroline, who just poked at her.

Mors resumed her previous position in front of us and continued. "Who else would you want to narrate?"

"It's just, there are certain parts that his voice kinda makes way smoother than they were."

"She's been through a lot, let Morgan work his magic."

"Well, I guess I can't argue with that."

We watched the rest and she wiped her face.

"Are you okay?"

"Who knew things were like that here? You're not as bad as I thought, at least not compared to that one guy. Or like, everyone else. Damn, this is fucked up."

"Yeah, sorry for putting you through all that. But this is the world you'll be stepping into."

She sat silent for a moment, staring at the screen which was inexplicably paused on Bob's backside.

I gave him a damn tail, he could at least use it to cover stuff every now and then.

"This is going to sound bad, but why didn't you kill them? I mean the town. If you ask me, they deserved it."

"A mix of things really, I wanted to believe in humanity, even if I had to force things. There's also the fact that my daughters would be watching me kill their parents. I may

have announced that I was their father, but I could never take the place of their real parents. I could see it in their eyes, especially Wendy. She melted when she saw her mom. But I still should have killed Celairia and Belairia's Dad. Instead they had to do it themselves. I failed them."

I opened my eyes for a moment and ruffled Belairia's hair. She moaned something and tucked her face into her axe.

Damn, that girl is going to put an eye out if she's not careful.

I gently tried to pull the axe away from her but she had it in a vice-like embrace.

I gave up and closed my eyes again.

Blue's definitely not getting that back.

Caroline slapped me on the forehead. "Whoa!"

"What?" I rubbed my head, more out of reflex than anything.

"You just kind of vanished there and I could see what you saw on the screen."

I laughed. "If that's all it takes to surprise you, then you may be out of your depth here. Unfortunately I put this conversation off for too long and now I'm not sure if I should make you a body or—"

"Come on man, I can take it." She flexed a non-existent muscle. "Besides, what's the worst that can happen?" She gave me a half smile. "I'll die...?"

"No, there's worse here." I ran my hand down my face. "Mors, show her please."

Mors turned away from the screen as the atrocities I'd seen and committed played out in front of us.

The time I met Roscia in its entirety. Gone was the narration; the only thing we could hear now were screams, cracking bones and burning men. The girls I saved, my daughters and Liz in the forms I met them in. Reginauld pleading to me for vengeance as he clutched his children.

And then the girls I couldn't save, the boys whose heads still rested in shallow graves in pieces.

It was disjointed and splintered; parts were black and white, parts were blood red. I didn't want to remember any of this and I'm not entirely sure I was in my right mind for all of it. But she needed to see it, to know what she was really getting into.

I felt that familiar warmth on my cheek as the darkness wrapped me once more.

I turned to Caroline, who was hugging her knees, her wet eyes glistening in the darkness as a screen filled with horror reflected in them.

"I really didn't want to remember..."

She leaned over and hugged me. "Oh god. This is just... Jesus, man. Hell, we both have had it rough huh?"

I put my arm around her and she leaned into me. "I'm sorry, for so much... I." I wiped my face again.

She tucked her arm into her t-shirt and wiped her eyes with it, then mine. "Fuck, were you always this much of a pussy?"

I laughed. "Yeah, pretty much. I used to live in fear of that sad dog commercial coming on in public place. At least until my apathy overtook my depression. But this place has stripped that all away. I can only be me here and I have no control of those." I nodded to the black spots on her shirt.

"Damnit! I got this at a—"

"It's not real. Nothing in here is, not even the body you have right now."

She slapped the back of my head. "Watch those eyes, don't think I don't see where they're looking. Besides, that's rude, saying nothing's real while checking out my chest."

"I was reading the shirt!"

"Oh, I've never heard that one before. Tell you what, make me a body and I'll call it even."

I must have been giving her a slack-jawed look again because she reached up and pushed my mouth closed.

"Alright, fine." I gestured and Mors flew over. "Tell her what you want, I guess Fernando and I are hunting tonight."

Chapter 10

I opened my eyes and noticed my left arm was trapped between something very hard and something very soft.

I looked down to see my hand wedged between Belairia's axe and... Belairia.

Oh, this is not good. If I wake her up like this then she may never trust me again, also Liz might kill me. She's secretly the jealous type, and if I hadn't been with the rest first then she probably wouldn't accept them either. I looked over at Liz; she was still softly snoring, her body pressed against me, her front hooves wrapped around my right leg.

Alright, how to do this?

I tried to pull my arm free while not disturbing Liz on the other side, but with each motion Belairia tightened her grip pancaking my hand against the axe.

I sighed... Oh yeah, the sleep fog! No, nope that just feels wrong given the situation. Weakness? No, that would be mean and if I did that she may very well wake up in a panic and sprint into the woods.

I moved my hand little by little and she murmured something, causing me to stop. Liz must have heard it as she stirred a bit moving her leg up to my waist. The twins responded and I was now pitching a fine tent.

Great, this'll make explaining things even easier if I'm caught. Caught? Shit now I'm even thinking like a guilty person. I started breathing hard at the thought of it. God damn this Perversion. Maybe I really should chop the twins off. No, no, with the number of mates I have, I need it... Maybe just a little squeeze.

I clasped my fingers softly, cupping her soft perfect—

"Whatcha doing, Boss?"

"Fuck!"

Liz's eyes shot open and her body tensed up.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...

She shot Bob a dirty look then fell back into a light slumber.

"What the hell, Bob?" I whispered.

He got close enough that I felt his breath on my neck as he whispered in my ear. "So ya did call dibs?"

"Shut up, she did this herself."

"Yeah, I bet that'll hold up in court."

I sighed. "A little help please?"

"What, ya want me ta squeeze the other one?"

"No, you bastard, I'm trying to free my hand."

"Is that what ya were doin'?"

"Well... Yeah."

"Then what's threatenin' ta poke me in tha chest?"

"Something that should tell you to back the hell off."

"Alright Boss, have it yer way." He lingered for a few seconds just breathing in my ear before he disappeared into the night leaving only the afterimages of his eyes.

Sometimes Bob worries me. Also, what the hell man? That didn't help at all.

Still, Belairia didn't wake up despite Bob's jarring voice. Maybe I can just pull my hand out and she'll stay asleep.

I composed myself for a few moments. *Come on, Caroline's counting on you. I can't just tell her, 'Sorry, I was stuck on a titty.'*

But damn, these things are feeling mighty skin-like through the leather top I made her. Wait, why am I not feeling leather? I looked over beside her to see her top laying on the ground beside us.

Then that means...

Take a deep breath, I'm sure it's uncomfortable to wear that thing all the time. It probably doesn't breathe and it can't be pleasant to sleep in.

I took a deep breath. *Don't look down, it'll only make things worse. Just focus on getting your hand free.*

I slowly pulled my hand, only to have my fingers come to rest on a gently hardening point. The twins strained to feel the night's air as her nipple slid between my fingers.

I mentally spoke to the twins. *No! This is a girl you call daughter. You will not respond to this!*

Ah, but this softness. I pinched lightly only to hear a small gasp.

I froze. Shit, shouldn't have done that.

She moaned softly and rolled against me, her arm over my chest and her hand resting on the twins.

Okay! Now's my chance, the pressure is gone. I leaned up slowly, gently removing my arm from under Liz's head. Then I made the mistake of looking over at Belairia.

Her eyes were open and she was staring at me. Her hand moved to cup me and the twins twitched in response.

My mouth fell open as a million different excuses flew through my mind, each less convincing than the last.

Her eyes slowly closed and she put her hand down my pants as her slow breathing resumed.

Damn, what the hell is this situation!? Is she awake or asleep?

I said a soft prayer to no god in particular.

An answer came unbidden as the darkness embraced me. "She's awake..."

Not helping!

Okay, she must be testing me. With lust? No, I'll fail that test every time.

Her hand closed around my upper twin as she continued to pretend to be unconscious.

Wait, am I the one being molested here? Where's an adult when you need one?

Bob's eyes shown in the far-off darkness. No, a different adult, he'd probably help her.

No, if she's the aggressor then... My pulse quickened and I could hear my heartbeat in my eardrums. That means if I go further then it's not my fault.

I used my free hand to untie my pants, letting the twins spring free. She slowly moved her hand up and down as I squeezed her breast, kneading her nipple between my fingers.

She sat her axe aside and her free hand disappeared into her pants. I rolled over, letting the twins rest on her hip as I used both hands to massage her naked breasts slowly.

Wait, no! This is your daughter, man! Stop before...it's too late.

She dipped her head back and licked her lips and as her hands sped up her grip tightened.

I felt her moving her hips slowly against me as soft, sweet moans escaped her full lips.

I reached down and slowly untied her pants. She shimmied and soon her ass was pressed against my pelvis.

She guided my twin to a very wet, warm place and began working it in.

I gasped as I felt the tip part her lips and press against her restored hymen.

I brought my lips down to her ear. "We shouldn't do this. You're my daughter."

She tilted her head back and kissed me. It was sloppy, but it made up for lack of experience with passion. Our tongues mingled as I fought the urge to thrust into her.

She half opened her eyes and whispered. "I never asked for that. You just decided on your own."

"But, it's... After what you've been through..."

"It's true, but sometimes the best way to get over something is to do it yourself. This is what I decided, and you're the one I chose."

My anger cut through my arousal. "This isn't the right way to cope! I only wanted to nurture you, not use you!"

Liz stirred behind me and threw her arm over me. We lay there together not daring to breath as Liz's snoring resumed.

"She'll kill us, you know! I mean like literally."

"Miss Liz isn't like that, besides, she's been through it too. If anyone understands me right now it's her, and maybe sis."

She pushed back against me and I felt the pressure increase.

She pulled my head back down and we kissed for a while.

She whispered again between trembling breaths. "I'm taking back control. This is my decision."

This is the first time since Lina, that me and the twins didn't agree on something.

I pulled back and rolled over to get up.

She slung her axe over me, knocking me on my back as she finished removing her pants.

She wrapped her powerful legs around me and held me to the ground. I started to fight my way up until I saw her tear-streaked face.

I brought my hand up and wiped her tears. "This isn't the sort of face you should be making if this is something you really want."

She sniffled. "That's not why I'm... Don't you feel the same? I know you felt it! I knew from the second time you brought me back."

I thought for a moment as I pulled her down and pressed her head to my chest.

I ran my fingers through her thick hair and she relaxed. "Of course I do, but you deserve the chance at a normal life. A chance to grow up before you're tethered to someone for the rest of your life. Have you ever had a boyfriend before?"

"When I try to think about that, it grosses me out. Men are just big balls attached to tiny brains. The thought of some guy thinking he owns me makes me sick. I'm a fighter, but none of them would ever see me as one. They'd just want me to make babies and tend the house."

A teal light covered us and a shiver went up my spine. I turned my head slowly to see the devil's countenance reflected on the face of a cute centaur girl.

"Fuck..."

I used the calming effect.

Liz breathed out a moist fog as her hand raked across my shoulder leaving bloody tracks.

An olive light shined from atop me as Belairia locked eyes with Liz, and for the first time that I can remember the twins deflated.

No one said anything as I felt the weight of Belairia's axe slowly lifting off of me. A warm fog came from her mouth as the two faced off.

"Young lady, you overstep yourself," Liz hissed through clenched teeth, a large chunk of ice forming in the air above us.

The bushes rustled as a rhythmic slapping sound came from behind us.

I looked up to see Bob's eyes glowing in the darkness.

We all stopped dead and Belairia reached for her top while covering the rest of her.

Liz flung the ice ball and Bob let out a pained yelp followed by a pleased grunt.

So...this is my life now, huh.

I lay there for a while, the twins flopping in the breeze until a furry knee collided with them, causing me to double over.

Yep, I deserved that. Wait! The hell I did.

I turned to Liz to tell her off but instead of the sweet face I loved, a hannya stared back at me. All thoughts of defending myself vanished in an instant as I tucked the twins away and sat up.

I rubbed my head as Liz's eyes threatened to bore holes through my skull. Nothing I can say or do here.

"Bob."

"Yeah, Boss," he said a few feet behind me.

"Why aren't you asleep? It should be Ralphus's turn now."

"Ah, apparently Sadako kept him awake last night."

I continued rubbing my head, moving down to my neck. I looked around for Ralphus and found him sleeping against a tree, Mark's head resting in his lap.

"And what about Mark?"

"I kept him awake last night."

"Then what about you?"

"I... Never... Sleep..." he deadpanned.

I looked back to Liz, who glowered at me.

"Liz," I said in almost a squeak.

She breathed out a steady stream of fog. "Yes?" she hissed.

"Uh... Will you take this watch? I need to go hunting with Fernando."

She growled in response.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Belairia hopped up and pulled my face down hard enough to pop my neck as she kissed me forcefully, causing Liz to shriek.

She broke the kiss with a smacking sound. "Good luck, daddy!"

Ah, the twins are alive again.

Icy water fell on us as Liz's staff glowed.

I called Fernando with pheromones and we walked off into the forest. I looked back at the three who were still awake. Liz clenched her staff, Belairia hefted her axe, and Bob smiled wickedly between them.

Yep, I'm sure everything will be just fine here. I pity the sha'dwarg that wanders into them.

'Here, John, nom.'

Fernando snapped his mandibles shut and a squirrel-like creature released its final cry.

We hunted until the early morning sun shone through the trees.

All in all we gathered numerous rabbits, a handful of squirrels, a few long-toothed bobcats and some large rodents.

Eh, there's probably enough for a body here. Fernando rolled over and I gave him some belly rubs.

It pained me but I'd probably have to borrow some more from Fernando and in so doing cut into my offensive ability.

"Mors, what did she decide on?"

Mors chuckled. "A blue-haired cat-girl."

I laughed to myself. I'd like to do that, but I prefer to be original.

"I'll do the cat-girl part, but she'll be unique. It doesn't sit right with me to clone something."

We began fleshcrafting a humanoid body but my mind was still clouded with what happened earlier. I just couldn't shake how Belairia felt, how close I came to doing something I couldn't take back. On top of that, there was everything that happened with Caroline.

"Master, focus!"

"Sorry, Mors." I slapped my face to bring myself out of my thoughts and into the present.

I looked down on the skinless flesh construct we were putting together and felt a strong sense of mortality. We're going into certain danger soon. Liz, Belairia and even Bob. If I lost any of them I don't know what I'd do and now I'll be adding Caroline to that list, she has no stakes in this fight but if things go wrong she'll die all the same.

"I'm sure she's aware, Master. She's got her own demons; I think she just wants to be free."

I turned my attention back to my task. Maybe there's a way I can give her an escape.

"Mors, can we make her a werecat?"

"Mm, that would more fall into the category of skills. Fleshcrafting to be exact, and on about the same level as you. Even Threscia couldn't pull off a full transformation, and she became level five after separating from us."

So that's out of the question. What else could we do? A basic cat-girl may have claws and improved mobility, but

claws lose to swords. And mobility alone isn't enough. *Wait...* My eyes locked onto one of the rabbits beside us.

Maybe if I mixed high mobility with high defense she could at least escape safely. Possibly even put up a good fight against steel.

"Mors, tell her I'm sorry but a catgirl with no magic isn't going to cut it in the fights to come. She's going to be something else entirely."

Mors disappeared and reappeared a few moments later.

"She says whatever, just hurry. She's starting to get creeped out in there."

"Mors, we're making something new. The hind legs of a monstrous bear make things too hard to control for a biped, so let's use something similar to a rabbit. I'll also be using chitin on her legs, arms and back. I want the claws on her feet to be monstrous. Six inches or more. Her hands can be normal, but give her bone spikes like Lina's. We'll also be spiking her knees and enlarging her ears. I guess we'll cover the rest with fur for the moment as I don't have anything to make clothes with me here."

She'd be a culmination of my previous works, making her almost as fast as Liz, as tough as an oni, and as dangerous as possible with abilities alone. I'd also give her galvanism and mimicry. If she can master the rock form, she might be able to turn her running momentum into a battering ram-like attack.

"Sounds good, Master!"

Mors took control and soon the body started to take form. *Unfortunately blue is not a hair color I can make as it's not a natural pigment, so let's keep the dirty blonde. She probably won't be happy to be going down to a B cup, either, but there's not enough fat in what we caught. Maybe if I borrow some from Fernando...*

We finished and I looked upon our work. I don't accurately know how to describe it; it was a bit like a velociraptor mixed with a bunny. *Yep, this looks like shit.*

Let's spread the fur over the chitin; it'll still be there but now it's covered up except for the knee spikes, which actually compliment it. I stopped the fur at her clavicles and Mors reproduced her face perfectly. The blue of her eyes mixed with the yellow of the wendigo, making a light green. *Let's change that; she's in a fantasy world, so we should let her feel the part. Violet is a good color.*

"But Master."

"What is it, Mors?"

"My eyes are purple..."

I thought about patting Mors' head. "I promise she's not taking your place."

I looked over my finished creation.

"She kinda looks like Daener—"

"Maybe, if she didn't have bunny ears."

"Perhaps just a similar color scheme. Although her hair is darker. Huh, the things you notice about a person when you're creating their body."

I added all abilities and added additional nerves to capitalize on galvanism.

I used blend and infused her soul into her new body.

Her eyes opened slowly and she tried to sit up, but instead she just spasmed and landed on her face.

"Uh, you should probably take it easy for a few, until you adjust to all the new stuff."

"Ugh, you dickhead! Warn a girl next time," she said, her words muffled by the mossy earth.

Still, those rear muscles give her the nicest—

I noticed her looking back at me and turned my back. "So, you're not a catgirl. You're more of a monstrous bunny person. I did my best with what I've learned. Your rear leg strength is incredible, you have claws and spikes, night sight, life sense, armored chitin and thick skin. I pumped the galvanism up to eleven so you might be the fastest thing I've made; that being said, I guess there are side effects.

Sorry, you might try moving as slow as possible, that should decrease the jerkiness until you get used to it."

"You're the jerk! I ha—" She bit her tongue and squinched up her face. She took a few moments and flipped onto her butt, glaring at me.

I laughed. "I... Sorry."

"Stop apologizing, you pu—" She squealed as she bit her tongue again.

"Slow, just act slowly."

She raised her arm slowly.

"See, you're doing it!"

She smiled as she extended her middle finger.

"Ah, very original, I'll introduce you to Mark later, you two will probably hit it off immediately."

"Mach?" She winced as she spoke.

"Yeah, one of Bob's mates."

"He hath mathes?"

"Yeah, he's a popular man-lady."

"I'm noth evensth goin to ath."

I reached my hand out and caressed her cheek, mending her tongue injuries.

"Alright, are you ready to try walking?"

When she nodded I heard an audible pop and she fell to the ground, dead.

Ah shit, maybe I did too much.

I used fleshcrafting to reduce the amount of nerves in certain regions like her neck and mouth as I mended her. At least now she won't accidentally kill herself again.

I re-infused her soul and she stared at me. "What the hell happened?"

"Oh, nothing, you just passed out. Let's try standing again."

As she nodded, I looked away. *I think I hear something.* A moment passed, and I looked back to see her giving me a what-the-hell look.

I just put on my best used-car-salesman grin and held out my hand.

The look on her face turned to suspicion. "Man, you look creepy as fuck right now. Stop it!"

Oh right, sharp teeth and big jaws probably don't play well with beady eyes and fake smiles.

I shrugged and pulled her up, supporting her weight.

She looked down at herself for the first time. "What the fuck man, no one likes hairy titties! Do you have any idea how sweaty it's going to be underneath these things?" Her hands moved down her legs to the space between them. "Jesus, you realize that for at least a week every month, this is going to be hell for me, right? Are you some sort of sadist?"

"Yes, but that's not why I did it. Do you see any clothes around here? Relax, it's just temporary."

She moved her fingers a little farther in and yanked her arm back, her hand shaking as she brought it to her face.

"I-I-I think I just bit myself!?"

"Uh, yeah, that's standard issue with any women I bring back. I would have warned you but it's awkward to explain."

"Why the fuck would I need something like—" She winced again as I mended her. "—that?" she finished breathlessly.

"That's the sort of world you've entered. I'd like to say you'll never need it, but there may come a day when you will use it."

"So basically I'm a furry bunny lady with vagina dentata?"

I nodded.

She blinked at me. "So, is going back into the darkness still an option?"

I laughed and she joined me.

"Don't worry, we'll rework it once I'm back to my town and have additional materials and clothes."

She leaned on me and we started walking towards the others. "Come on, one furry paw after the other."

"Shut up!" She blushed then turned pale as Fernando skittered in front of us.

She stopped dead. "J, John... John! There's a..a..fucking thing in front of us."

"Oh, that's Fernando, he likes belly rubs."

Fernando raised one mandible as if shooting a thumbs up.

"Th-that fucking thing likes belly rubs?" She went limp in my arms.

I used fleshcrafting to wake her. As she came to, her eyes locked onto Fernando and she was out again.

'Fernando, belly rub?'

Fernando eagerly skittered over and rolled over.

I woke her again as I was rubbing Fernando's belly. "See, it's not—"

She screamed and clawed her way away from me as I felt a presence watching us.

"Stop! No one move!"

Fernando tensed up under me and rolled over. I smelled the air for a minute, picking up on a horrific and all too familiar smell.

My eyes darted around as I pushed night sight to its limits. It seemed like as soon as I caught something out of the corner of my eye it was gone.

"Sha'dwarg..."

My pulse froze in my veins as my heart stopped. *Where! Where is the fucker!?*

Of course! I'm such a fucking idiot! All the blood from the animals we gathered along with our small number has made us targets.

'Fernando, rock, now!'

I heard a blood curdling scream as Caroline's body flew over me. Her blood splattered the trees around us and I heard a sickening thud when she hit the tree in front of me and slid down it slowly.

No... No!

I twisted behind me, turning my arm into a spike. There was a swoosh as it cut through the air connecting with nothing.

There was a crunch as pain shot through my body starting at my leg. The next thing I knew I was slamming into a tree.

"Not this time, you bastard!"

My bones shot through my flesh in rough spikes and I heard a loud yelp, followed by a low growl.

I used air barrier. As I rose, I listened intently but silence was all I got in return. I canceled my barrier and used stalk as I dove into the darkness.

I won't let us be wiped out, I've come too far!

I waited there, using all my senses to pick up on even the slightest change. There was nothing.

No! The camp, Liz, Belairia!

I rubbed my hand across Fernando gathering bone as I ran towards camp.

'Fernando, bring, girl.'

As I neared, a trio of screams greeted me but when my eyes found the sha'dwarg, I saw Bob had it pinned, his massive fangs buried deep within its throat. He was also dry humping it.

I felt relieved as I vomited.

Bob bit down and with a sudden twist its head flew off, landing beside me. It snapped at me as the light faded from its eyes.

"I love it when they struggle. Oh, hi, Boss! Ya gonna eat that?"

I heaved but stopped myself. "Uhh, shit..."

Bob continued to enjoy the sha'dwarg.

"Jesus, Bob, put those things away."

The sha'dwarg emptied its bowels and a foul stench spread throughout the camp.

The others were different shades of pale white. Liz ran off, followed by Belairia, and both could be heard emptying

their stomachs from the bushes.

Ralphus just laughed until Mark retched on him.

Fernando came skittering from the forest and I returned the bone mass I had borrowed as he dropped Caroline by my feet.

I ignored the barfing that was taking place behind me as I examined her. She was missing her left leg from the knee down, her ribs were busted, and her face was split open. It seems that the joints are her weak points, and the sha'dwarg knew instinctively.

Oh god, I never meant for her to have to go through something like this. I brushed the hair from her face as I mended her.

"Bob, toss me a leg!"

There was a wet popping noise, then something hit me in the side. It was a front leg.

"Thanks!"

I used what was there and restored her leg as well as the rest of her injuries. She didn't die, but it might be a while before she wakes up. I decided not to force her this time. She deserves sleep.

I walked over to the sha'dwarg's remains as Bob dismounted them and proceeded to clean himself while staring at Ralphus.

I placed my hand on it and checked its condition. She was a mother, late term. I used fleshcrafting to push out the pups. Aww, maybe we could each take one an—

Bob snapped them up in his jaws and with a few crunches they were gone.

Shit! I shot Bob a dirty look, he just shrugged while licking his lips.

I couldn't be mad at him after he had saved everybody and he knew it. He just went back to licking himself and making Ralphus uncomfortable.

I separated the skin from the beast and began removing the moisture. Caroline complained about her body, so let's

change that.

I used its tendons and fashioned a sort of dress similar to Leera's old one for her. I walked back to her body and removed the hair she hated, clothing her in sha'dwarg fur.

I wiped the tears from her face and wondered what she was dreaming about. Hopefully not what just happened, she doesn't need to remember that at all.

'Fernando, eat.'

I pointed to the sha'dwarg and Fernando happily pounced on it, tearing and dissolving it piece by piece.

Bob yelled in protest but Fernando hissed at him and he backed down.

I heard a whisper in my ears. "So, who's the new gal?"

I jumped but regained myself. I'm getting used to this by now. "It's someone you know. Be nice to her, she's been through a lot."

Bob's eyes were glued to Caroline's chest.

"Hey! Aren't you satisfied yet? Why don't you take Mark somewhere and fix that?"

There was a rush of air as he and Mark disappeared.

I shook my head as Liz and Belairia returned.

Belairia's eyes latched onto Fernando as he ate, then she disappeared back into the bushes for round two.

Liz on the other hand was staring intently at Caroline. The air gradually grew cooler as a teal glow shifted its gaze to meet mine.

I enabled life sense and stared back. "This is a friend from my world. She's not a mate, nor does she want to be and she's already died twice tonight alone. Please don't make me bring her back a third time."

She blinked as the her glow gradually faded.

I sat leaned against the tree Ralphus had previously occupied, careful to avoid Mark's sick.

I closed my eyes.

It's best to get at least a few hours sleep before we arrive tomorrow.

I felt a weight on my shoulder as Liz lie against me. I put my arm around her and tried to clear my mind as I drifted off to a dreamless sleep. Later I would need to find Threscia and confront the cult.

Chapter 11

The first thing I noticed when I awoke was another weight against me as Belairia lay cuddled up to my other side. The next thing was that the remains of the sha'dwarg had vanished and Fernando had returned to being the size of a small horse. Bob and Mark were asleep together and Caroline had yet to move from the spot I left her in.

With a weary mind I got everyone up and moving, and after a reasonable breakfast of smoked meat we set out again.

Belairia refused to ride with Liz and climbed on Bob with me, Caroline and Mark. Ralphus eagerly volunteered to ride Fernando. He said it was like the ultimate fruition of his family's efforts. I just nodded and away we went.

Things were quiet for the most part as we rode. Last night we had all seen each other's darkness and no one felt like talking about it. Caroline still didn't wake up even though I had tossed her around to get her on Bob. As a result she rode in front of me so I could keep her steady.

"Boss, I'm sorry about last night. Adrenaline and all that."

"Trust me, Bob, I understand. I've seen the real you more times than I care to. You're forgiven. Though Sha'dwarg puppies would have been awesome, you still saved everyone."

"Yeah, I don't know what that was, some instinct or somethin'."

I thought about it; I guess animals did typically kill offspring that weren't theirs. That might be why this sha'dwarg was hunting solo, but it still made me wonder about the last one. Was Bob actually made out of the father of those pups?

We got to where the river cut us off and made our way to a shallow spot to cross.

I looked back at Liz who was running with a frown. I wonder if that's for what happened last night or for what's going to happen today when we meet the cult.

I guided Bob towards Threscia's signal. I know everybody told me not to worry but it only made sense to check on her. Especially since we were basically headed right for her. Though I know I wasn't entitled to one, I still wanted an explanation for why she ran off. It wasn't like her and I figured she had to have a reason why she didn't come back, if not for me, then for Roscia.

"Hey Boss."

"Yeah Bob, what's up?"

"There's somethin' I need ta tell ya."

"Go on."

"Be careful with that past life spell I gave ya. Time don't work like ya think it does."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's not a straight line, it's a circle, all knotted up and folded in on itself. Ya think yer goin' in a straight line, but everythin' overlaps. All things happen at the same time and yer mind straightens it out. If ya use it, ya can't undo it."

I shook my head. "Relax, I have no intention of using that spell. Just like I have no intention of absorbing all the souls from the book. I'm strong enough as it is, to invite other consciousnesses into mine is unnecessary at best."

"It ain't always like that. I found out some things I shouldn't have, but it was my choice. Ya may not have the same options. Just know I'll always call ya Boss no matter who ya become."

"What's this about? It's not like you to suddenly give advice. Well, not good advice."

For once Bob stopped smiling. "Eh, I'm gettin' deja vu. I can't remember much, it's kinda like tryin' ta remember a dream ya had a week ago."

"Don't worry about it Bob, remember when I talked to the other you? I'm not the same John as that guy. I'm no one's puppet."

Bob smiled softly at my words, but I couldn't help noticing that the smile never made it up to his eyes.

It seems like I may not win this fight.

I looked down at Carol, who was gracelessly draped over Bob's back in front of me. If I lose she'll die again. I've already let her down several times now. As a hero, I'm useless.

When I look back, all the signs were there. The pulling sensations, if I'd only known what they meant I could have saved more. Now all I can do is punish the ones who caused... *Hold on.*

There's a sensation, though not a pulling one coming from beyond Threscia, towards where we're headed. It's not a good one, though. I don't know how to describe it. Maybe like getting a text from someone you hate.

Either way we aren't far from Threscia now, maybe we can meet up with her in a few hours.

Belairia and Mark chatted about town gossip as we rode. Apparently Mark is Nex's second cousin and Belairia's family isn't originally from Theross but from overseas. I guess that explains the hair. I've only seen a handful of black-haired people here, her family making up most of them and Quenelia making up the other one. Though Quenelia's hair was different, silky, flat. Belairia's and Lil-sis's hair was short and fluffy.

Why the hell do I like hair so much, is it because I'm bald, both here and in my past life? And redheads, both Fura and Wendy's mother, for some reason I can't help but to stare. I made Fura's hair a radiant red, but Adria's hair was natural, copper. Part of me hated myself for lusting after her when I already had so much, but her feelings for Wendy were genuine and I still remember holding her hand, as small a

gesture as it was. It filled me with that awkward sweet feeling of a first date.

"Boss, somethin's digging into my back, ya think ya could point those some other way?"

"Shit, you know you like it!"

We both laughed as a hand slapped the back of my head followed by another with way more impact.

I turned to see Mark leaning over Belairia's shoulder, an angry look plastered on his face. Belairia on the other hand was smiling.

I looked at Mark. "For the last time I know you love him, but Bob's not my type." I then turned my attention to Belairia. "And why the hell did you slap me?"

She blinked several times as her face reddened. "You were thinking about last night, weren't you?"

"No, I think we all should forget that last night ever happened. I love you, Belairia, but not like that, not yet at least. You need to live a little more before you can make decisions like the one you almost made for us both."

She frowned as Bob spoke again. "Boss, really, yer killin me here; move 'em, or I'm stoppin."

Belairia smiled again. "You are thinking about last night!"

True to her nature, she's still not dissuaded. I shook my head and reached down to adjust the twins. *What the hell am I supposed to do with these, wrap them around my waist? Hmm, maybe I could air them out a little until they go back to normal. My back is to everyone. Maybe no one will notice.*

I stealthily untied my pants and let them free. Man, this feels great! Bob jumped over a log and a loud thwack was heard as they clapped together and Belairia reached around my waist to steady herself.

"Something keeps brushing my hand. Is that your harness?"

"Uh... Yeah, don't worry about it."

She grabbed where she shouldn't have and let go immediately.

"That's..."

I quickly tried to tuck them away but she leaned forward. I barely made it in time as she tsk'd.

For some reason she stayed like, that her face by my ear. "I asked Miss Nex and Miss Leera, they said it was okay."

"W-what was okay?"

I felt her hot breath. "Me... and you, us. Nex said I had proved myself as a warrior and Leera just looked relieved, and interested."

Damn, of course they did. When I think about it Belairia checks all of Nex's qualifications and Leera's probably happy to have another girl in our harem. I say our because I think she views it that way. I can tell she has feelings for me, but she loves the others just as much, especially Lina and Fura.

I hung my head. Don't I have any say anymore? No, I see an out. Wait, why am I looking for an out Belairia is charming in that tomboy sort of way, I've always found her attractive. No! This is your daughter. But it's not by blood. No, this is a slippery slope that leads down roads that shouldn't be traveled. Very well, let's take it out of my hands.

"Then win over Lina, Fura, and Liz and we'll visit this again."

I clutched my ear as she squealed before giving me an enthusiastic hug and kiss on the cheek. She bounced up and down behind me.

"Oy little missy, ya keep that up and yer fallin' off at the next log," Bob shouted back.

"Sorry uncle Bob!"

"Uncle Bob?" I asked.

"Yeah, we all call him uncle."

In a twisted way that makes perfect sense.

Mark leaned forward. "I call him daddy!"

"No! That is not something I want to hear."

Doubly so, considering what he was doing in his previous life. I don't even want to think about that.

Wait a minute, I think something just clicked.

"Bob, were you ever on Springer?"

"How'd ya know?"

"Now I know why you were so damn familiar. The episode where your grandkid called you daddy!"

"That's cause I was."

"Ew, just ew, Bob."

"Hey now, last night ya were about to be the same as me!"

He's right, god what have I become? Wait a minute, what would it even be like if Belairia and I had a child? Half human, half me. No, how much of me is human? What, about twenty percent? And Belairia, abilities aside, is about ninety percent. So far, I've noticed that the ones that are human are better at magic, but lacking in physical advantages, Belairia aside, she has both. If it was a girl I'd hope she'd have her mother's fluffy hair. A picture formed in my mind of Belairia cradling a child, and us having a family with Lil'sis being the secretly doting aunt. It was cute, it made me smile, but this wasn't the place for such delusions.

I hardened my heart and focused on our current goals. There's much that needs to be done. The frivolous stuff can be thought of after we survive the current situation. If all goes well maybe we can move everybody to the dark academy and take shelter under their barrier to avoid the crusade. With Fura's abilities, I'm sure we could even make it a self sustainable place.

I felt Threscia's signal grow stronger, we aren't that far now. I had Bob slow down and we began searching for her.

Liz and Ralphus trotted up to either side.

"Why are we slowing?" Liz asked, staff at the ready.

"Threscia's around here."

Ralphus tensed up his eyebrows. "Whatever for? Why is she so close to the academy?"

"A guy stole my finger and she took off after him."

Ralphus's face blanched pale. "Please tell me you're joking!"

"Nope, it happened."

Ralphus facepalmed and began muttering to himself.

"What is it?"

"We're probably too late, just pray she caught him!"

Liz looked worried as she came closer. "You never read that book you gave us did you?"

"I skimmed it, what of it?"

She just shook her head.

I looked between her and Ralphus. "Goddammit, one of you tell me what's happening!"

Ralphus shot me a stern look. "You know how there's a part of your soul in each part of you right? Well, Eunice can use that for any number of things. She can curse you, track you, and even listen in to what you're doing. This puts everyone at risk and when it comes to hexes, Eunice may be the strongest. Let's hope she doesn't know what she has."

A chill went up my spine. I fucked up, no surprise there, but things might be worse than I had anticipated.

I saw a blob deep in the forest where the canopy threatened to block the sun. *These trees aren't even the leafy kind, something else must be at play here.*

We ventured deeper as the blob darted from one tree to the next at high speed, sometimes suspending itself between trees. I caught a familiar smell.

"Threscia! It's John!"

The blob froze and suddenly descended, coming closer. I deactivated life sense and used night sight.

Threscia gradually came into view as she leaped, landing a few feet away. She had undergone more changes. She now had some sort of stinger, for lack of a better word, protruding from her lower back and four long spider-like appendages coming from her upper back.

I dismounted Bob and the two of us moved towards each other, then when I was in range she slugged me.

"You idiot!"

I mended my jaw. "I didn't know until a couple of minutes ago. Wait, how the hell did you know?"

"Didn't you attend any of Lang's lectures on hexes?"

"Obviously not, our gobs wanted me in the church."

"Did you at least read the book?"

"...No, that's my bad. I'll take it you didn't get it."

"No, I caught up but he ran into the forest over there and never came out."

Ralphus came up beside us, his face growing even paler. "That's where the barrier starts. He's already in."

The decision now was whether to fix the cult problem or dive right into the dark academy.

"Bob, do a quick reconnaissance and search for any signs of the cult. It's strange that there aren't any here, and I have a bad feeling that there might be a reason for that."

"You got it, Boss!"

Bob let everyone else off his back and was gone in the blink of an eye, leaving me staring at a very moody Threscia.

She had her arms crossed and was looking at me as if I was the biggest fool she had ever seen. Of course she wasn't wrong. Everyone had told me to read that damned book. I'd even had the incentive of learning new magic. I had just wanted to take it easy for a while, is that such a crime?

I grabbed Threscia and twirled her around in my arms.

"What the void do you think you're doing!?"

I pulled her close and hugged her from behind. "Something I should have done a long time ago."

She fought, but it was all for show. If she wanted to, my head would be bouncing off that—

I felt a sharp impact as the vertebrae in my neck broke and my skin tore. I lost all sight and the sounds of the forest

disappeared.

"Master, you're dead!"

"Thank you, Mors."

I grew eyes in my stump. Threscia was a few feet in front of me, staring with a stunned expression.

Huh, it wasn't her!? Then who?

I turned my body around to see Belairia, bloodied axe in hand.

Really!?

I walked over and picked up my head, it was making a kissy face. Damn, I'm pathetic. I placed it back on my neck and mended the damages.

As sound once again returned to the world I heard Belairia screaming at Threscia.

"What makes you so damned perfect? Why, why does he choose you!? You're just as damaged as me, as her!" She pointed to Liz, who still had a mortified look plastered on her face.

To have that effect on Liz she must have made quite the show of decapitating me.

Mark had propped up Caroline and was hiding behind her.

"Hey!" I shouted as I marched up to Belairia. I grabbed her axe and ripped it from her hands. As strong as she may be, I'm still stronger.

"You need to calm down! This is neither the time nor the place to start this shit!"

She looked at me, her face contorted in rage as a single tear fell. She tried to wrestle the axe back from me but I wouldn't let her have it.

Finally she broke down and fell to the ground hyperventilating.

I tossed the axe to Threscia and knelt down, holding Belairia in my arms. Goddammit, I'd neglected her too much. I didn't think she would be okay, but she seemed like she was until last night.

She hit me hard enough to break my ribs, my arm and my clavicle.

I mended the damages as I held her tighter.

"Stop this! You want me to see you as an adult? Then you need to act like one!"

"But I can't! I can't take it! You refused me, then you try to take another!"

"Threscia is someone I've known for longer than even Liz; she has lived inside me. I was only embracing her because she needed it. I could feel her soul crying out for something, but it was only recently that I realized—"

"I need it too! I'm not just some girl who—"

"Boss!" Bob appeared as if out of nowhere. "Shit, am I interruptin' somethin'?"

Belairia shook as she sobbed softly in my arms. I hugged her tighter until it stopped and stood.

"Yes, but I'm sure it's important, what did you find?"

"Hop on, I'll take ya there."

We travelled at full Bob speed, Liz running not far behind. Soon the smell of blood filled my nose and we stopped at a place full of bloody red robes.

"Things ain't lookin' great for that cult."

I leaped from his back and examined some of the robes as Liz looked over my shoulder.

"No remains, just a bit of blood-soaked fabric. What does this mean?"

I held the robe up, it was all in one piece. If this was an animal it would be ripped to shreds. If this was a human, then they wouldn't bother to undress and move the body, unless...

"Bob, go get Ralphus, actually get everybody. I need a second opinion on this."

As Bob disappeared Liz moved to pick up another robe. It was different than the rest. It lacked a hood and long slits were cut down the sides. Liz's hand trembled as she held the garment in front of her.

"This is hers! The one she always wore." She threw it down and several of her icy arrows pierced it, driving the fabric deep into the red mud.

"I should have been the one to kill her!" Liz shouted as her eyes lit in an ominous teal blaze.

I embraced her. "It's okay, wrong begets wrong. Whatever she did, I'm sure she's paid for it now."

"No! Death is not enough for that woman! Do you even know how many friends I lost!? How many tears I've shed? I wanted to show her the gifts you gave me, how powerful I've become. I wanted to crush her with my own power, but now... What am I even living for?"

I kissed her as I wiped her tears. "For me, for our people. For the children in the town and for the children we will have. But most of all for yourself, you should live because you want to."

"But I... For so long, I..." She fell limp in my arms as sobs overcame her. "I wanted revenge! But now I can't have it, I can't have closure."

"Have closure in the fact that you're alive and she isn't. Have closure that she sowed the seeds of her own undoing while you will forge your own path. No matter what, she can't hurt anyone anymore!"

Liz fell to her front knees, clutching those robes in her hand as Bob reappeared behind me. Everyone dismounted and Ralphus surveyed the scene around him.

He walked from bloody robe to bloody robe and after some time he nodded to himself. "One of two things happened here. Either Eunice killed them, stripped them and took their bodies as materials, or, less likely considering there's still blood left, the blood elemental drained them."

I gave Liz a kiss on the forehead and joined Ralphus. "But if Eunice killed them, then why wouldn't their robes show signs of battle?"

"There are many spells. She could have used exsanguinate. Given that there was a blood elemental, that

would be likely."

"Ex-wha?"

"It's a low-level blood magic spell. Though in her case it might be able to act as a higher tier. It converts an enemy's blood to mana and drains it. Blood mages are rare these days with most of the spells being lost to time, but the spells that still exist are considered to be stronger than normal magics. I'm sure that Eunice has access to a tome or two in the vault. We keep relics from many dead gods, after all. It's also the default spell of a blood elemental. Though if it was the blood elemental it would have drained everything to add to itself."

"But simply draining blood doesn't account for the rest. I'm a flesh golem, I know the composition of a human body better than most. Even without blood there's still plenty left behind."

"That's why I'm leaning towards exsanguination. Without blood, you get a stronger zombie. Also the body shrinks down. These robes may have simply fallen off. We have an army, all zombies. The ones Eunice makes are always a bit stronger than the rest. Exsanguinate may be the reason."

Thoughts of people simply shriveling away as they died filled my mind.

Calming effect!

I looked to now sickly Ralphus. "We need to get in. If there isn't a cult to deal with then there's only one way to go. Who can I take?"

"As I said before, you could pass as a flesh golem. Fernando could pass since he doesn't have a soul, but no one else."

Threscia grabbed my shoulder. "Wait, John. You're probably walking into a trap. I know I haven't been clear with you, but if she wiped out these guys, you can bet she's dangerous."

"Why do you say that? Have you seen these guys in action?"

"No, but I felt cautious enough to stay hidden when they were around. Something about them told me I couldn't beat them. If you go in there you may never make it out."

"Then do you know anything about what beat them?"

She stood close to me, enough that I could feel her warmth as she whispered, "No, but I could smell death on them, enough to make me hide my presence. I'm almost as strong as you and I knew I wouldn't win against them. But something killed them so quickly that I didn't even notice."

All six of her arms wrapped around me. Wait, six!? She had grown new arms similar to Fernando's prehensile fangs. She now used them to crush our bodies together as she continued speaking almost entirely in pheromones. "You will die, and though I seem distant, I am grateful to you with every fiber of my being. You saved my sister and brought me back from a terrible end... Please! Please! Don't go!" She pulled me closer and I noticed sadness in her perfect blue eyes. "I know what happens if you die, everyone will follow, the young, the old, me, my sister, and all your mates. We'll all die. You can't risk it!"

I replied in pheromones. "I have no choice, the crusade will be upon us soon. If we don't make allies or find a new place to live then we will die anyway. I have to take the dark academy to use its barrier!"

She separated from me a bit so she could stare into my eyes. "Then for tonight stay with me. I will bear your children so you know you have something to come back to."

"I already have children to come back to. Lina and Nex will deliver soon. I don't intend to miss either!"

She blushed as she slapped me. "You idiot, are you really turning me down right now?"

"No, but isn't this a bit fast? I mean—"

She kissed me and even though she now had mandibles I felt it all the way to my core. Her devotion and love reached right to my center. Of course she was meant to be the mother to my children. She knew what sex would bring and

that's exactly what she was aiming for. She wanted to take it all in. She wanted to bear the burden of bringing lives into this world. Lives that came from us both, from our union.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"Because I wanted you to find Thads. I wanted to kill him but as a mother I would be tethered by thoughts of keeping our children safe and cared for. But now, if you're going to go off on a foolish suicide run, I want to keep something of you. Let me bring our brood into this world. I want to be the mother of monsters. Not just to exact my revenge but to have something you can come back to. Something you feel obligated to return to. Please, John. I know you better than anyone. I've seen every part of you and I want you as the father of my children." Her blue eyes shone brightly as she finished, then I felt a prick as she injected me with something. "Don't worry, it'll just paralyze you. I know you want it too, but I can't take no for an answer right now. You have to go, but for a while I'll make you mine."

She shot a web behind her and we disappeared into the forest canopy as the others cried out after us.

I used blend.

You've learned Paralytic Poison!

"Isn't this like Lina's?"

"Heh, I didn't think that would hold you for long. Yeah, I was inspired by her hunting ability so I copied it. Though mine isn't magic."

"Just how? And the web?"

"Fleshcrafting, the queen's ability lets you make additional poison sacks and formulate your own poisons. There's also the fact I've been fleshcrafting bugs. You know, there are a slew of abilities they possess. I guess in this way I've moved beyond you a bit."

We landed in the canopy and she forced me down on the web. I struggled against it but it didn't budge. I'm sure I could fleshcraft out of this, but not without losing a significant amount of skin.

I looked her over. "Hey, what gives?"

"I told you, we're doing this. I became yours, but at that time you also became mine. I don't need your consent, and I don't want to hear you argue about what's about to happen. I know how you feel, and I know you want me, even though I now look like I do."

It was true. She had become the most inhuman woman I had ever seen, but she was still sexy. Her slender frame now accented with hard chitin covering her once soft flesh like armor she couldn't remove. She stripped her leather armor and tossed it aside, smiling at me as I gazed at the body she herself had crafted.

Mors was wrong. Everything was covered with black chitin. I watched as she moved her sharp fingers down between her legs. The chitin separated revealing her fleshy entrance which dripped with her juices. She plunged her fingers in before licking them clean.

"This is what I wanted. We do this my way. I know you can probably get out of this but I need you to respect me."

More of her natural armor parted, revealing her small perky breasts. Maybe Mors wasn't wrong. The chitin on her face parted to show a lust-filled grin as she straddled me.

"It's sad I had to make the first move; are you even a man?" A sadistic look filled her eyes as she held the tip of one of the twins at her entrance. She rubbed it against herself allowing me to feel her slickness as she stared into my eyes.

"Still I expected more resistance from you. You really did want this, didn't you? Even after all your talk, you're still a slave to your desires."

I was speechless; she wasn't wrong. I tried to thrust up as I felt her lips spreading, but she pulled back.

"I have two, one for human reproduction, and one for my cute little babies. In that way I'm like you. Which one will feel better I wonder?" She licked her lips as she continued to rock her hips just short of penetration.

My mind started to go hazy as I thought about it. I'd been teased so much in the past twenty-four hours that I was helpless against her. I knew this was Threscia, my first follower, the woman who knew my darkest secrets, and the most damaged of all. But I wanted her, truth be told I'd always wanted her—from the first moment I saw her I knew that she was to be mine. Her soul and mine had mixed and interwoven with each other on a level that I had never had with anyone else but Mors. Still somehow I'd doubted this day would ever come. The day when her lust would overcome her rage.

I don't even care about skin anymore! I ripped my right arm free and grabbed her, pulling her down on top of me. We kissed for a while, letting our tongues play with each other as I grabbed her waist and forced her hips down on me.

She gasped as I entered her. One twin tore through her maidenhead as the other was buried in a place unlike anything I had felt before.

She turned beet red as her eyes moistened. She gave me a look that was somewhere between arousal and pain as she forced my arm back on to the webbing

"Who, who told you that you could!? Ahh—"

"You're so cute." I ripped my arm free again and cupped her cheek.

"You, you can't call me cute, not when I look like—"

"But you are." I kissed her again and used fleshcrafting to separate from her webbing.

I mended myself as I enjoyed the feeling of being inside of her. Her front entrance felt tight wet and hot, but the rear one moved around me like tiny fleshy hairs teasing and rubbing me.

We continued to kiss as I began driving myself inside of her. She moaned into my mouth as her legs wrapped around me.

As I moved her moans turned into girly whimpers and her big blue eyes misted over. I stroked her long brown hair. "Am I being too rough?"

"N-no. Ah!"

She really was cute. It's a side of her I'd never seen before. It was more like the girl I'd first met minus all the rage. I knew it was still there, but for once she wasn't thinking about it.

I pulled back a bit and turned my attention to her perky breasts. Soft pink and petite. I began to suck one then the other as I moved my hand to her maidenhead and began to rub.

She cried out, unafraid of who might hear it, even though we were in a dangerous situation. She wanted this, even more than I did, and her body let me know what she had been keeping locked inside.

After a few minutes she began bucking as I thrust and I could feel her muscles clutching at me. I moved up and we kissed; her six arms wrapped around me and pulled me tight to her as her body convulsed under me.

I stopped rubbing her and savored the moment of her orgasm as I sucked her lip into my mouth and bit it.

She cried out but soon relaxed as I cradled her head.

We stayed like that while I let her catch her breath. I remained buried inside her. Her arms relaxed and she covered her face. I took her hands in mine and intertwined our fingers.

"It's not done yet; if you want my children then I need to finish too."

She breathed out hotly, blushing for the first time I could remember. All she could manage was a nod. This may actually be the first time she's come in her life. I know I shouldn't push things too far, but when she's looking at me like that and the twins are still feeling her warmth there's no way I can stop.

I began thrusting again this time a little faster and a little harder with each pump as the sounds of wet flesh echoed around us.

It wasn't long until she got back into it and the fleshy hairs of her rear sex began to move again.

My god, it's like heaven. I knew I was getting close, not only due to the sensation, but because this was Threscia. A girl I knew very well, one who had never opened herself up to me. Someone who knew me. Though I always felt it, I never thought it would happen, that the barriers between us would melt and we would mate.

I ran my hands along the exoskeleton on her sides. Like I'd thought, she had tiny hairs and could still feel this. I kissed along her neck; even though it too was covered by chitin, she still moaned as I made my way to her ears, then her mouth.

The hairs sped up as if begging for my seed and I knew it wasn't long before I would give in. I slammed into her without regard for force since I knew she could take it and the webbing began to bounce back underneath.

Her breaths grew short and quick as her body strained to accommodate me. She cradled my face and I stared into her eyes as I drove myself in deep, releasing all I had inside her. The waves of pleasure washed over me with each spurt as it filled her. I kissed her once more as it continued. Soon the familiar sensation of wetness gushed out and I lay on top, leaning on my elbows as we continued to let our tongues explore each other.

We stayed like that locked together for a while.

"Are you still...?" She clenched her muscles causing me to flinch.

She smiled up at me wickedly as she did it several more times. The hairs inside her now moved in almost a soothing way.

"You really did craft yourself for me, didn't you?"

Her blush deepened. "W-who the void would do that?"

I thrust into her again as my orgasm subsided. She gasped, pulling me close again.

I rolled over on her webbing, pulling her on top. She rested her head on my chest but I could still feel her rear entrance moving around me.

"You made two, who else were you thinking of when, ah, when you did that?"

She hit me lightly with her fist. "You're not supposed to say anything, just enjoy it."

I pulled her fist away and she opened it. I looked at her small armored hand as she closed it around mine. "I wish we had done this sooner, think of all the time we wasted not knowing this pleasure."

She turned her eyes up to meet mine. "I couldn't do it. I felt betrayed. The only thing I wanted was that bastard's death and here you were, mating and raising goblins. I promised myself to you, but you were busy with other things." She released my hand and began tracing circles on my chest. "It wasn't until I saw how you treated everyone that I understood what you meant to them. I felt selfish for wanting to take you away from them for my vengeance. There was also the fact that I didn't feel... I don't know how to put it. I still felt powerless, like we weren't on even grounds. Without being able to feel empowered I couldn't feel sexy. So I changed and I knew that it would drive you wild. I've lived in your soul. You only feel loved when a woman can prove they love you and I couldn't because for a while I couldn't even stomach the idea of sex."

I moved my hand up and began stroking her hair. "What they did is something I can never forgive, and what HE did." I sighed as I looked at my hand, clenching it into a fist. "Reginauld had to stop me from going to Therograd. Sometimes when I can't sleep I think of the ways I will kill Thads. I repeat his name as I let the emotions I felt from you and my daughters flood my mind and the thought of his agony comforts me. I want him to beg, but find only my icy

glare. I just want him to look for mercy where there is none. I want to crucify him and let Bob show him what he did to so many others before I mount his head above our latrines and let him suffer there until he almost burns out. Then I'll consume his soul to the void and let him feel nothingness for the rest of eternity."

She smiled up at me, but it was a smile that oozed malice. She clamped down on me again and I gasped as the silken hairs gyrated. "I just love it when you talk dirty to me!"

She pushed herself up as my quickly hardening twins entered her further. She leaned down as she began to move her hips again. "You definitely got me pregnant. I'm using fleshcrafting to make sure, so this, this is just for us, until we're satisfied and you can't take it anymore. I'll prove it to you, if you're a king then I'm the queen."

We continued there in her web until it grew dark once more, then we slept cradled together in our own world, oblivious to all until morning.

Chapter 12

I awoke still feeling the warmth as Threscia continued milking me through the night. She had done what she promised and I'm sure that by the end I wasn't producing seed any more. I cradled her lithe body on top of mine and the only thoughts that entered my mind were recollections of last night. I'd finally connected with her and had my feelings returned, although mostly physically. I'd also been able to see her for who she really was. She was still a hurt girl reaching out for comfort. In a way I felt bad, but I hadn't initiated this and I think it was good for us both. We'd been able to air our emotions and unspoken thoughts as we focused almost single-mindedly on making each other feel good. It was what we both needed and it was only at this point that she was finally able to release some of the hatred that bound her and reach out for me. I can't even imagine what she went through, but through strengthening herself she was able to move beyond it.

I suppose it helped to no longer see herself as a victim but as a hunter. I had no doubt that we would eventually catch Thads and she would finally get the justice she deserved.

I kept my eyes closed as I searched for my followers. I needed to make sure everyone was okay. There were five blips below me, and a sixth one, the one that pissed me off, was beyond the barrier, and no one was calling. All seems to check out. I just wonder who that sixth one is. A necromancer perhaps? Could it even be Eunice herself? *No, wait, why am I even able to sense it through the barrier when supposedly even gods can't penetrate it?*

I slowly and gently pulled out of Threscia.

"You idiot..." she murmured in her sleep as her arms dug into me.

She really was cute. I hated that I couldn't spend the rest of today as well with her. Now that things are the way they are I just want to settle down. But as long as we don't have a safe place that will be impossible. I hardened my resolve and made my way out of her web and back to the ground.

Everyone seemed to be awake. Belairia was sobbing into Liz's chest as she comforted her.

Man, what the hell changed here? Those two were at each other's throats yesterday. Ralphus was already reheating some smoked meat over the fire and Fernando was sitting like a good boy waiting for his treat. Bob and Mark were both quietly discussing their fears about being castrated by Muffy for not explaining things before they left. Caroline was hugging her knees and rocking back and forth muttering something.

An axe went flying past my head. "You asshole!" Belairia glared at me almost shaking in her rage. "How could you?! You fucked us both over for that, that, *bug girl!*"

"Hey, you calm down. I am your father until proven otherwise and I won't tolerate anyone speaking badly about Threscia!"

Her features contorted once more as she once again buried her face in Liz's non-existent breasts with a wail.

No matter how I look at her she isn't ready for a relationship. Forget the amount of mental fortitude it would take to deal with what I have going on. I know it's one-sided, but being that jealous will only lead her down a path of self destruction with me. I didn't intend to be that harsh with her but it's important she learns everything before she ever gets in a relationship with me. Maybe in a few years we can try again, but for now I only want her focused on getting stronger and enjoying life. Belairia still has a shot at normality, and no matter what, I don't want to take that from her. Maybe when she meets another boy she'll

understand, but I won't be locking her in a cage and forcing a rough future on her. Especially not if this affects her this way.

Liz simply nodded to me; it seemed like she understands. She holds no grudges against the ones that came before her, only to the ones that come after. Unfortunately, I can't say I won't be attracted to anyone else in the future, but I've never promised I wouldn't. I said as much before I took her as a mate, and though she may get territorial, she still understands. Also I think Leera helped in those regards. It's kinda hard to say monogamy is the answer when you're sexually active with another yourself, and Leera was active with everyone. I'm guessing this world didn't know or recognize bisexuality, but Leera was attracted to anyone I was. After she described her feelings for Lina and what she did to Fura I was a little shocked, but it made sense. I would give Leera a pervy guy, but that would turn me off too much.

Though maybe seeing her use it on some of our mates...that small frame driving itself into someone while I pulled her hair and... No, I'm getting side tracked again. Either way Belairia's mental state isn't at a point where I would feel good taking her as a mate.

I looked towards the well-spaced line of trees that signified the barrier between me and the dark academy.

I approached Caroline. I couldn't help but feel bad for her in this situation. She was flung from one hell to another. She was like an infant now, one that needed to learn how to walk—fast. She's basically a level-one player in a mid-level zone. Unfortunately everything hurts here, most things can kill her, and I won't be around for a while to bring her back. Though Healer can, he still can't treat stuff like poisoning, so she still could die just due to bad luck.

I sat down beside her. "How are you holding up?"

"I, I think I died..." She began shaking like a leaf.

Yeah, this is a normal human reaction. If I could I would give her my calming effect, but I couldn't.

"Eh, it happens to the best of us. I can't even count the number of times I've died here. My first experiences weren't much better than yours. Trust in those around you, and learn everything you can from them. But more than anything else, don't fall into despair. Things may be terrifying now, but you'll get used to it."

"Get used to it, are you listening to yourself!? Who the fuck gets used to dying?"

I turned back. "Show of hands, who's died before?"

Everyone raised their hands except Belairia, who was still distraught.

"See, you get used to it. Though you may have set a new record." I smiled at her.

She returned a look of horror. "You mean this won't be the only time?"

"I'd like to say yes, but no. It'll probably happen again."

"You suck balls at comforting people."

Mark turned and came over with sudden interest, followed by Bob.

"Good timing, Caroline, this is our former neighbor. Bob, look after her while I'm in there. In fact it might be better for you all to return to Riverbrook. This is sha'dwarg territory."

Bob nodded then returned his attention to Caroline. "Ya said ya weren't interested in stayin' with me earlier." He licked his lips. "I guess ya are now, huh, doll?"

She shook her head. "My god, somehow you've gotten even creepier." She looked from me to him. "Jesus, I'm going to end up in a basement somewhere, aren't I?"

"Just remember to put the lotion in the basket," I quipped, which unfortunately started Bob on explaining the new goblin mating dance I had performed.

She cracked up laughing and I left them to catch up.

I knelt by Liz and Belairia and had her look at me. "This is what I was talking about earlier. I'll never be just yours. That

was the decision I made when I came to this world. I know it's selfish, but that's how I am." I wiped her tears from her bloodshot eyes. "You need to take time and figure out what you really want and if I'm the best person to give it to you. Until then, I'm your father and I'll love you like one."

"Holy fuck," Caroline sounded off behind me. "No wonder you and Sal, er, Bob, hit it off. You're both freaks."

"Hey, who had furry titties not long ago?"

She opened the fur she was wearing and looked down. "Thanks... I mean, no, you're the one who gave me furry boobs in the first place so you're still a freak."

Bob moved his head around to try to peek at her, but she pushed him away. "You're like this dog I used to have, it humped everything."

"That's pretty accurate," I laughed, followed by everyone but Mark, who looked nonplussed.

It seems like everyone is back to high spirits. I think it's time to go.

I nodded to Ralphus and called Fernando.

Liz trotted up beside me as we headed for the barrier and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Please be careful. If they were able to kill Eva, then they are strong mages. Maybe even stronger than me."

I could only manage a smile. She was right. She outclasses me in speed and offense. I probably wouldn't be able to beat her, maybe not even someone of Ralphus' level either. Depending on what happened and Barzealis's ability to withstand torture, I could be heading into a nest of vipers or a lion's den. I could only hope that Eunice was still unaware or maybe even accepting of me. Either way, from what Ralphus had told me of her, she didn't seem the type to attack from the front.

I held Liz close and kissed her as if it was the last time, because it just might be. I traced my finger around her ear. "You really are beautiful, you know." She blushed and lowered her head. "If I don't come out, enjoy the rest of your

life; keep teaching the kids. Keep our people safe with your magic and don't hesitate to love again."

Her eyes misted over and she opened her mouth but no words came. She just walked back over to Belairia, who cried after me.

I turned to Ralphus. "Come on, we need to go before my will runs out."

I have to do this or we all die. The crusade is after me in the first place, so if I don't take these risks then I'm just going to drag everyone else into an unwinnable battle.

We stepped through the barrier. It felt strange, like passing through a waterfall without getting wet.

A path through the trees opened in front of us and we walked slowly along it.

"Ralphus, are you sure I don't need to disguise myself as a normal flesh golem?"

"No, if you did that you wouldn't be able to talk to anyone. It'd kinda defeat the purpose of making this trip don't you think? No, we need to display your godhood and open everyone's eyes to who you really are. Or rather what part of you is. Even if Eunice hates you, she wouldn't attack you without first proving that you are a threat. There are no laws against it, but she would want to discredit you and make herself look good in the process. That's how she operates."

He placed his mask back on his face as if preparing for battle.

"Why did you do that?"

"This is how most know me. It would be strange to them to see me without it."

"What should we do with Fernando?"

Ralphus's eyes looked back at Fernando with a hint of pride. "That's up to you. He may drive your point across quicker, but it'll be hard to keep people from examining him, or trying to. It might also be a platform for Eunice to declare you a threat."

As the academy came into view I pointed Fernando towards the forest and commanded him to blend in, and stay there until I came back or called for him. It might be better to have an ace hidden somewhere in case the shit hit the fan. I could call him with pheromones without alarming anyone. I guess it was good I had him eat the shad'warg; he was now back to fighting form.

I watched as he entered the forest, his body changing to resemble the bark of the surrounding trees. He looked back at me as if worried, then I lost sight of him.

'Don't worry, boy, we'll meet again.'

'John, miss you.'

He really has gotten smarter. I'd give him a belly rub, but he's already too far away.

I looked up at the sky as things got darker. Just like Ralphus said, not much light passes through. It's like wearing a pair of dark sunglasses, and things only got darker as we got closer to the academy. It was a massive gated mansion made of alternating gray stone and black cinder. It had one central spire in the middle that ended in five points. The top of the longest point was surrounded by something that resembled a dark cloud and I guessed that was where the barrier originated.

The closer we got the more I realized the scale of this place. It was as large as any castle I had ever seen pictures of. But other than the spire in the middle it looked like a mansion. I never dreamed something so large could exist here, that these people had reached this level of construction. If this was earth this thing would be a major tourist attraction.

I don't know when I stopped walking but Ralphus gave me a slap on the back with a hearty laugh. "Everyone does that when they first see this place."

"Does what?"

"Stands there with their mouth open and their nose pointed to the sky. It never fails to amuse me."

"I never expected to see a building like this in this world. In mine it would be a marvel that could even match the pyramids. How is this possible?"

"Pyramids? Well, putting that question aside for now. Don't underestimate a necromancer's ability to build. We have an inexhaustible workforce that doesn't require sleep or sustenance. We also have a slew of scholars who dabble in architecture and study ancient structures. You won't find another building like this on the continent except maybe Theresa's Cathedral, but of course none of us could ever go near that place. I've only heard stories that it scrapes the heavens."

My mind balked at the thought of it. This place made the eiffel tower look small and yet there was a place that was larger. Here, without motorized equipment.

"How!?"

Ralphus shrugged. "They cheated, it's built into a mountain so really they only had to do half as much. Most of it was just carving out and using what was already there. We built this from the ground up with zombies and magic."

Of course, magic can be used like this as well. I wonder if we could build something like this one day.

We came to the massive gates and Ralphus proceeded to chant something while twisting a circular symbol etched in the stone. When he was done the gates slowly slid open, revealing a cobblestone courtyard with various detailed statues depicting different stages of decay. I approached one and placed my hand on it. I felt like I could manipulate it to some extent though it would take a monumental effort and several days to make even the slightest change.

"This, this isn't stone is it?"

"Nope, death is an artform. These are our forefathers and mothers. Even now they still watch over us."

I activated soulsteal and Ralphus backhanded me in the chest. "Don't! That's blasphemy, even to me. Normally no

one would be able to take those souls, but you, I can't have you absorbing our ancestors."

"What if I wanted to speak to them?"

"Still no, this is sacred. I may be your follower, but please respect our traditions while you're here."

"Fine, my apologies."

I canceled soul steal. I'll talk with them at some point when he's not around. Who they are and what information they could share is too much to pass up. Though perhaps they would react like Ralphus and treat me like a criminal for disturbing them.

I looked at the plaque underneath the statue I was touching. I had to use my ancient language translation to read it as it was in the old tongue.

Marias Trounsdia Vivet: Third of our order, the mother of death. Creator of exanima, purifier of the mind. Mistress of darkness and devotee to the void.

"Ralphus, have you read this plaque before?"

"Of course I have, but if anyone saw you taking one of their souls we'd be killed without question."

I looked around. "There's no one here though. Is it always like this?"

Ralphus' eyes grew wide for a moment. "No... but it's not unheard of." He seemed to calm himself as he inspected the grounds around us. "There's no signs of a fight, perhaps there's an assembly."

We walked cautiously to the double doors and as he opened them I saw a grand room filled with tables and a large stone altar at the front with a singular podium beside it. I half expected there to be candles floating in the air and ghosts frolicking around, but it was just a room. I sighed.

"Hey, you just sighed, didn't you?"

"...No?"

"Just what were you expecting here? This is used for rituals, and lunch. Sometimes at the same time. Either way

this is where an assembly would be, but there's no one here."

"A place this large, and somehow we still haven't seen another soul. Is it an ambush?"

"No, with our forces there's no point in ambushing someone, even you."

We continued to the end of the massive hall. I noted that wooden bowls of half finished soup still sat on the long tables. Ralphus too seemed to see them as our pace quickened.

Ralphus paused at a small doorway and proceeded to chant to unlock it. "This place may interest you. It's a shrine to the dark god."

I began to sweat as he flung the door open. "Go on, check it out."

A shrine to me—maybe there's something I can learn here. I crouched and entered slowly. It was dark enough that my night sight could only make out a few outlines. I grabbed a wooden object and held it in the light.

"...This is a me-damned broom closet."

Ralphus guffawed. "Hah!"

I gave him a deadpan look. "Really, at a time like this?"

He just continued to laugh.

I put the broom down and came back out.

"Yeah, the torch went out in there and no one bothered to fix it. Either way we needed to investigate it. But your face!" He laughed again.

I felt a grotesque pulling sensation coming from somewhere in front of me, maybe lower. It's that gross follower of mine, crying out for help. As repulsed as I was, I still felt a strong obligation to check it out.

"There's something wrong here! One of my followers is calling to me from a place ahead of and perhaps a little lower than we are standing."

Ralphus's eyes regained their seriousness as he hurried down the hall.

"That would be the basement, where our army is kept. If something is happening there then we might be under attack! That would explain why no one was here."

He fumbled his way through a side door with a massive circle. He didn't bother to chant; instead he placed three red soulstones inside of three inset holes.

"Red!? Isn't that human?"

"Yes, not good ones I promise, just hurry!"

I felt a tinge of rage. A soul is someone's very identity, and to consume or subjugate it just to enter a door is ridiculous. But if Ralphus says they were bad people then I'll believe him.

We made our way down a spiral staircase. Ralphus held his hand to the wall and chanted the entire way, not pausing for a breath. When we reached the bottom stair he stopped and the way we came erupted in spikes.

Ralphus stood there for some time wheezing. "By the void, I hate coming down here." He continued to pant.

Damn, that was a feat. Did everyone who came down here have to chant like that? It's as much of a physical feat as it is a magical one.

I heard voices echoing from up ahead followed by the complete cessation of the pulling sensation. I stopped dead in my tracks. Nothing should be able to stop a soul from calling out to me. Nothing! I felt a dark embrace. This is an affront to our divinity. Something dares to trample on our link, cutting us off from our followers!

I began to run as Ralphus called after me. A red light grew as I approached the opening to another chamber. What I saw inside made me pause.

Chapter 13

The ground, walls and even the ceiling were covered in blood. The rest of the room had several robed figures forming a circle around a woman in green and black robes that shone brilliantly. I activated night sight and looked at the rest of the room. Zombies as far as the eye could see in all directions. Some large, some small, some made of races that I hadn't met yet. Orcs, gnomes, kobolds and even a few goblins. Farther out, trolls or ogres, giants, centaurs and more beyond my sight.

My god, is this where they all went? All these fantasy races? All these things that I'd wanted to see, now reduced to shambling horrors, and this pulling, where did my follower go? Someone who worshipped me, revered me, has disappeared from this world and my only explanation is this foolish spectacle.

The woman was still chanting as the blood began to move. It gathered into a tight ball and took on a human form, no, an elvish form, a proper one like I'd been hoping to see. I felt the pulling once more.

That thing! That's my follower!?

A phrase came to mind. Blood elemental. That's the blood elemental Ralphus warned me of and it's calling out to me.

It shot out a pressurized blast of blood and three robed figures were split at the waist. Their cries of pain were snuffed out as their flesh mummified and their blood flowed back into the elemental.

It raised its head and screamed. "Give her back! She wasn't HER, but she loved me despite myself! Without her, why do I live!"

The pain in its voice reached me. Suffering so strong that, were he a soul, he would have already burnt himself out. The raw emotion displayed, and his desperation so palpable that I could feel it, made me want to take his side.

The figure in the green and black robes did not answer, instead she just began to chant again. I couldn't make it all out, but it ended with exsanguinate.

The blood elemental exploded again making the room red with his essence as some of it flowed into the woman.

Ralphus was right about exsanguinate. The robes in the forest were her victims, not the blood elemental's.

I felt a presence as Ralphus knelt beside me. "So this is where they all were. There! That ball, it's the blood elemental! It's rare that Eunice would invite others into this chamber. She must be trying to minimize casualties."

The conflict inside myself raged. Save the blood elemental, my follower, and earn the ire of the dark academy or turn my back and let him die.

The darkness gripped me tighter. "Not even one of our followers shall fall! Save him, or become a worthless god who betrays. I will abandon you as a pretender if you let this pass."

A dark pulse came from my core, knocking Ralphus down. I turned back to him. "I'm sorry, but he's one of mine. Despite the fact I don't like him, I must save him in his moment of need."

Ralphus ripped off his mask. His face contorted in fear. "That's Eunice herself! You'll be making an enemy of us all!"

His words reached me, but I won't be a pretender. This man called out for me, he's desperately struggling for something, and I feel his plight. I must act soon!

Calming effect!

Even though she had absorbed a bit of him, he still remained; as long as there was blood he would live. There were also numerous robed figures around. So he could reach them with his abilities and sustain himself.

He reformed again, this time dodging back, and with whirling blades of blood he reduced another group of necromancers to paste.

Ralphus clenched his teeth as he spoke. "He's killing us! Damnit John, I knew them, they were good kids!"

Without a second's hesitation Eunice chanted again causing him to explode again and drawing more of him inside of her.

Ralphus's rage became almost palpable. "She doesn't even care! She's just letting him do as he pleases while she expands her mana pool!"

The answer to what I should do came to me as he spoke. *If she intends to sacrifice all these bodies to him just to gain power then helping him to kill her is the only logical step. But wait, should she survive then I may be dooming my people. I need to bide my time and move when it benefits my goals.*

He reformed and this time she waved the robes ones aside as several naked zombies swarmed towards him.

One in particular still had a feminine form with long black hair. He wailed as he looked at her. "No! Give her back! She..."

His words were cut off as Eunice began chanting again. He shot a pressurized blast towards her, but it was blocked with a red barrier.

The blood elemental's posture broke. He cackled. "Fine, you fucking bitch, just fine! I never needed her anyway. Now, I'll console myself with your cries of agony. I'm not half-assing it anymore! Exsanguinate!"

Eunice's expression contorted in rage as she lost control of the one advantage she had. The surrounding mages erupted as their blood flowed through the air, joining the elemental. He laughed and poured everything toward Eunice, sinking her barrier until it finally broke.

Ralphus punched the wall behind me. He has always been there for me and my people, so sometimes I forget he

is a part of another group. To him this must be hard to watch.

Eunice simply let out a small laugh as the blood erupted from her body. She fell to the ground like a brittle twig, stiff and completely drained.

The elemental turned his attention to the rest of the robed figures as they ran. A massive bloody blade shot out from him and many were cut in half, their blood flowing through the air to join him as he laughed.

The female zombie was strangely unhurt as she shambled towards him. I couldn't help but notice she had the pointed ears of an elf.

He embraced her and her body regained its flesh. She was beautiful, no one could deny it after seeing her naked form.

He kissed her deeply. "Eva! Come back to me, I know I've treated you like shit, but I..."

His words fell on deaf ears as she began to gnaw at him. His flesh gave and reformed at the same rate as he fell to the ground, a broken man.

Eva!? Was that the woman that ruined Liz's life?

There was a flash and a familiar blaze as green flames enveloped Eunice's body.

I turned to Ralpus, who was still clenching his fist, his eyes feral with rage. "She's becoming a lich!"

He didn't budge, his attention instead focused on the robed bodies that littered the ground almost as far as I could see. Between Eunice and the blood elemental, it looked like the dark academy had suffered a terrorist attack. Nothing but death lay in this room, observed by only the expressionless faces of the zombie army.

I could hear the blood elemental's sobs as he severed the head of the female zombie. "Another one I failed to save... Just like..." He tilted his head towards the heavens as a gut wrenching cry echoed in the massive chamber.

The skeletal form that was once Eunice rose and began to chant, and this time it wasn't exsanguinate. The zombies that had been dormant began to moan and stir.

The blood elemental stayed there cradling the body as each zombie that approached was reduced to scraps by his blades.

I could hear more chanting from Eunice, now hidden behind her zombies.

I felt the dark embrace telling me to do it now! If I didn't then my follower would fall. On an instinctual level I knew I didn't like this guy, just as I didn't like Eva, but that didn't change the fact that he was calling to me, now more than ever. His soul beat out a steady rhythm of sadness and self-sacrifice. I couldn't simply abandon him.

I leaped down from the staircase. *There is something that I can do here. Something that will both serve to save him and ingratiate myself to Eunice.*

I put myself into undead mode and charged at him between the zombies. This place is a flesh golem's paradise. Here I am almost limitless.

His blade slashed out at me as if I were any other undead but I mended the damages as I absorbed the flesh of the surrounding zombies.

I stretched out my arms, and though he cut me several times I managed to make contact with his true body.

Blood is a part of flesh; I could manipulate it. His attacks stopped and I drew him inside myself. Every last drop.

I spread the blood thin in my veins, preventing him from lashing out. I then focused on mending the small damages he was inflicting from the inside by absorbing the surrounding zombies.

My fleshcrafting speed exceeded the damage he was able to do and he eventually relented. The feeling I got through my connection with him seemed to say he had given up. He was no longer pulling me to him, he simply

allowed himself to be circulated and mixed in my bloodstream.

I returned to my living mode now that the danger had passed.

A skeletal figure cautiously made its way through the zombies. She stared at me, the bright green flames that she had for eyes seeming to scan me.

Ralphus appeared between us, his arms stretched out in either direction. He turned to the lich and bowed. "Master Eunice! I congratulate you on your ascendance and present to you the physical representation of the god of darkness and the void. Our patron, whom both myself and Barzealis have been serving."

I felt a stirring from my blood, but I condensed my veins and thinned him out some more.

I activated dark armor, soul steal and life sense.

She paused, her mouth falling open as an ethereal voice came from her. "Rise, yon Ralphus and gather our fallen brethren."

He dusted off a cloak from one of the dead and draped her with it as she continued. "And you, 'Dark God'..." Her voice lacked sincerity and for that reason my soul stirred. I debated killing her, but I let her continue. "For slaying this tool of our enemy's I will hear you out later. For now I will return to my chamber and mourn the loss of life that happened here today."

She wearily walked past me, clutching the cloak to herself as if I were trying to see her goods, which now consisted of ribs. She strode on the bodies of the fallen as if they were carpet and a tinge of rage hit me with each of her steps. Weren't these her people!? Weren't they friends, students and colleagues? But still she never looked back as she ascended the stairs.

"Ralphus, I don't like that woman. She tramples the corpses of her comrades."

He nodded as he was gathering the bodies together. He looked first to the stairs then back to me. "That's what she's like. At this time of day, these were the first years. Novices, not even past their first semester and she used them to make herself even more powerful. Odds are she lured that blood elemental here through the grand hall and into this room for that purpose. She also must have granted him passage through the barrier. In the end, she's the one that killed these kids, not him."

I went to the bodies he had arranged. Some were dried husks; some were simply cut in half.

"I can save a number of them. The husks I can't do much with, but I can take their souls and wait until I have the supplies to restore them."

Ralphus's eyes lit up. "Please, please do! We'll go to the parts shop, we might be able to restore the rest there."

I mended those that still had their bodily fluids and infused their souls back into them. They rose with confusion as Ralphus briefed them on what happened and pointed to me, calling me their savior. Some cried, some thanked me. And some looked as if this was a given. They definitely had a broad range of personalities here.

I took the husks' souls and absorbed as much of their bodies as I could without compromising my speed too much.

As I worked, I observed the zombies in this seemingly endless basement.

I'm guessing she had lured the blood elemental here to guarantee victory, but as things turned bad, she hid herself behind a wall of undead.

I marveled at all the races and variations as a thought gnawed away at my mind. Was she responsible for the disappearance of the many races of this world? Did she collect her army, or was it just a matter of making zombies of those that got stuck in the barrier?

I asked Ralphus but he had no idea. Many of these zombies were here even before he could access this room. If

I compared that to Reginauld's stories then this room had orcs since before he remembered them vanishing. Maybe she just grabbed the stragglers.

After I restored the last novice I could, Ralpus and I made our way up the stairs and headed to the parts shop.

The stairs didn't have an enchantment for going up this time. At least Eunice was nice enough to disable it. Though I think that was more for Ralpus to get the bodies out easier.

"Hey, this can't be the only way to get these guys out of here can it? I doubt the larger ones would fit, and the thought of trying to make a shambling horde go up stairs seems ridiculous," I said.

"No, there's other ways. That room is in its own space, and there's an artifact that can open it up in whatever location it's needed. However it requires many necromancers with many soul prisons to chant to charge it and I'm sure Eunice didn't want anyone else finding out about this. Now that everyone will be saved, I wonder what her excuse will be. She probably planned to pin the invasion on one of the dead novices. It will be hard now with all the witnesses being alive and well again."

As we made our way down the hall, I could finally hear signs of life coming from different rooms we passed. They spoke different aspects of bodies, anatomical terms, abilities. Farther down, they covered mana manipulation and soul conversion. Becoming a full fledged necromancer seemed like a hard thing to do. It made me think of college in my world. These guys were basically like a cross between med students, coroners and zoologists. Maybe the magical stuff was taught on a different floor.

We came to a large set of elaborately decorated stairs. The doorframe had depictions of zombies fighting various things, ranging from crude flesh golems to mythical beasts. When we arrived at the bottom, I saw a large arena. There were no seats, and parts of it were walled off as if it had been annexed to build more rooms. I remembered Ralpus's

conversation with Barzealis. I'm guessing that zombie fights were now something taboo, or maybe just something that had fallen out of fashion.

Ralphus chanted by a reinforced door, and I could hear a low grinding noise that ended in a clink. He flung the door open like someone coming home after a hard days work.

When we were alone Ralphus removed his mask and sat as if his body weighed more than he could bear. "The rare parts are all gone. I meant to bring them to you, but as I said before I had to use them. Luckily, there's plenty of human parts here. Please, remake the students." He walked into an adjoining room and shut the door.

In front of me were several piles of parts separated into groups. Legs, arms, abdomens, pelvises and heads. There were also drawers labeled with different tags by different monster races but they didn't have much in them.

I heard a bang from a metal door on the other side of the parts piles. As I moved between the parts to get to it, I noticed a cold sensation. There were circles underneath each, with holes inset into the floor. Large pieces of green amber were set there and I could guess how they worked. I had seen Liz enchant her staff, but this was on a whole other level. The plate that I wore to protect my core and the chains that secured it were both enchanted. The chain was made with soul-forged steel, but the plate had no obvious markings, no inset stones and displayed no signs of being enchanted. *I'll make a mental note to check all this out while I'm here. I might could learn something that could make my people stro—*

My thoughts were interrupted by another bang from the door in front of me. Curiosity, it's always been a weakness of mine. What horrors could be beyond that door, and how could I use them? Sorry students, I have my priorities.

I examined the door. It too was sealed with some kind of enchantment. This only made me more interested. I might see something great here!

"Mors!"

"Yes Master."

"Of the students inside me, are there any who know how to get through this door?"

"Yes, let me bring him."

I closed my eyes and a young man clad in simple black robes appeared before me.

"Wha!? I was just fighting some blood guy then... Oh... No! I'm not dead! I refuse to believe I'm dead!"

"Calm down, young on—"

"NO! I can't be dead!"

Right, when has telling someone to calm down ever worked before?

I paused to think as he continued to freak out. He ran screaming into the endless darkness.

Well, that's fun.

"Mors, bring him back and hold him in place."

Her grey wings turned green as she used her power and the youth flew squealing all the way until he came to a sudden stop several feet in front of me. Green flames circled his body as he was held in the air.

"You done now?"

He screamed at the top of his lungs as he squirmed.

Well, this isn't very productive.

"Mors, play cat videos."

"Which ones? There's more than 2,583 of them in your memories."

I facepalmed. "Please don't announce such things aloud."

Yes, I'm John, the god of darkness, slayer of men, and lover of fluffy kitties.

Mors chuckled.

The darkness lit up as the videos played and the man's panic turned to confusion.

I got a strong feeling from the man, curiosity, not unlike my own. He was a scholar indeed.

"Set him down and give him a parchment and quill."

Mors nodded and a desk appeared with parchment, quill and ink. The man slowly lowered until he was sitting there, writing something with fervor.

Let's not tell him that the notes stay here when he leaves.

He murmured something to himself. "What is this feline creature and what is its obsession with this cheezburger? Fascinating! Oh! It has the properties of a solid and a liquid. If I fitz I sitz? I must decipher this archaic language and its meaning to better understand these majestic creatures."

"Hello there. I'm John, and you're not dead. In fact, I'll be returning you to life shortly but there's something I need first."

"Yeah yeah, but what is this nyan thing. It flies with a rainbow and its song is truly mesmerizing."

"Ah, never mind that for now. I need to get beyond this door. I must know what's there! Help me get in and I'll allow you to continue your studies here for a bit longer."

"Sure, yeah. But first, what happened to this one to make it appear so grumpy. It seems displeased, though I see nothing to cause its duress."

"That's a sad story actually. That cat's deformed."

"K'hat? Is that what they're called? They do resemble the felines I've seen before, but these ones lack the long fangs and seem docile. Did your kind domesticate them?"

"Yes, I'll tell you more later. The door first!"

"Sure, sure. Just insert three fingers into the three indentations and repeat after me while turning right. *Ralphus aedes deducebatur, nec indicare Languriya!*"

Another Ralphus original here.

The meaning of the words clicked at the same time as the door swung open. There was a loud chime and Ralphus came running out of the adjoining room adjusting his robes.

He screamed no, but it was too late.

I was faced with several very well-endowed female zombies and flesh golems that were obviously assembled of

the best female parts. I quickly closed the door and turned to him.

We eyed each other nervously for a while until I interrupted the silence. "I'm telling Lang."

His face resembled the scream painting as he cried out and fell to his knees. "These were prototypes for Lang's body. I didn't know I'd be able to get her back until I met you!"

"Okay then 'nec indicare Languriya' what's that about?"

He shied away again. "W-well, I couldn't really explain this to her if she came here could I?"

"Alright mister zombie harem, what about the fact they all have souls?"

"I didn't want them to rot too quickly, the souls in them aren't even human."

"Right, well then, you do you. It's none of my business, but I'd recommend getting rid of this before Lang sees it or gets word of it somehow. I have a feeling she'd kill them all and put you in here. After that, we wouldn't see you again."

Ralphus nodded enthusiastically as I walked to the room he just left. I'm discovering all sorts of things about him today.

I looked inside, it was just a small bedroom consisting of a bed, a wardrobe, and a wooden desk.

I looked at his robes. They glowed in the green symbols I now recognized as soul-powered enchantments. Ah, he was changing into his official robes.

I looked back at him as he awkwardly walked toward me still on his knees.

I sighed. "Sorry man, I didn't mean to pry too deeply but damn. Some of those zombies were..."

Nope, I'm not going there. That's his personal business.

I shook my head. "Mors, let's bring back these students."

We spent the next half-hour assembling and bringing back the dead novices, including the young man who was now obsessed with cats. He lingered, asking me all sorts of

questions about what he had seen, until Ralphus drove him off with threats of expulsion.

Still, the parts piles took a big hit.

"Are you sure your shop can stay in business like this?"

He walked over to a large wooden box in the corner of the room and opened it.

The inside was filled with little black Fernandos. I almost find it hard to believe that these little things used to freak me out so much.

Ralphus closed the lid as he spoke. "As long as I have these, I have a shop. Also, we're never short on human bodies or human souls. Speaking of which, we need to find your finger! If it was traded here, then it should be somewhere in this parts shop, it's not like Eunice would grant an audience with a cutthroat because he found a finger. I mean, there's no one naive enough to... Where's my apprentice?"

He must be talking about the cat-fan.

"You threatened to get him expelled and he ran off."

Ralphus sighed and shook his head. "Alright, for now, put on a robe. I was fatter before Lang ripped off my lower jaw, so there should be one that will fit you."

He shoved me inside the room and closed the door.

How the hell do you get too fat for a robe? I sorted through his wardrobe and put the robe over my clothes before stepping out.

"Ooh, you're looking quite menacing indeed!" Ralphus said as he nodded in approval.

"I guess that's supposed to be a compliment, but still. I could do better if I had my sewing supplies with me."

"Yes, that reminds me. You consumed Harolf did you not?"

"Oh, you mean Dipshit? Yeah, we've had this conversation before."

"Well if you go to his shop you'll find all his supplies there. It's not like anyone's used them since he left. Fashion

was more something that Eunice valued than something anyone else cared about."

"So for now, find your apprentice, save Barzealis and dethrone the bitch. How should we start?"

"Now that you're here and Eunice has become a lich we should be able to take things slow. Though she already resembled a skeleton, I'm sure this transformation has taken a toll on her vanity. So she'll probably be using her flesh golems to create a new body and given how much she cares about her appearance, we won't see her for a few days at least." Ralphus pulled a piece of parchment from a drawer and began sketching something out as he continued. "What happened down there was likely outside of her calculations. I'm just glad that to some extent she got what she deserved. She's a lich and the students are fine. Ha!" He handed me the parchment. "This is a sketch of the academy."

I examined it closely, did a five year old draw this? What the hell is that, was he even trying? This mighty academy was reduced to looking like a soft-serve ice cream cone. I looked at him in pity.

Ralphus' brows knit together. "What's with that look? I'm a bloody necromancer, not an artist. Look here, these are the floors; as you go up, the classes get harder. Eunice's office is at the top. Likewise in this other building, her quarters are at the top. Easy yeah? This here," he tapped the sketch, "this is where Har- Dipshit's quarters and workshop are. I don't know if there's any benefit going there but if he got the book of souls he may have known of some secret passages or some other methods to get through Eunice's barriers and traps."

With that we split directions. I headed towards Dipshit's workshop, and Ralphus went searching for his apprentice.

It's strange, but somehow I expected there to be some sort of security here. Though I guess with that barrier not letting anyone out or in unless they're approved and each

person knowing offensive spells, this place is already plenty secure.

A bell rang. It was more like a church bell than the trill of a school bell in my world and I was mobbed by students making their way through the hall. I was stuck for several minutes just hugging the wall as the black mass of robes made their way into other classrooms.

I saw a small group of girls chatting in the far doorway and deduced that was the choke point.

"Oh my void, did you see Eolania's zombie today?"

"I know! Can't she at least brush its hair or something? It got dandruff all over my robes."

"...Cathia, that's not dandruff."

I took down my hood when I got close. "Pardon me ladies, but could you please vacate the doorway. Everyone's trying to get through."

"Ew, what is wrong with your skin? Why's it all gray?"

"Leave us alone troll-guy, we're busy."

I used life sense and spoke in a low tone. "Move!"

Their heads jerked back and they slowly backed against the wall. The others that saw also backed away.

Well, I guess this works too. I know I was supposed to blend in, but stuff like that annoys me to no end. Inconveniencing everyone just so you can shit talk. Call it revenge from my school days.

I canceled life sense and put my hood back up as I reached the stairwell.

Damn, this is a lot of walking and stair climbing. It kind of reminds me of when I visited the statue of liberty except without the tour guide.

The halls cleared and I could once again hear the monotones of lectures coming from the classrooms I passed. I picked up a chant every now and then that was cut off before finishing. I'm guessing that this is where things get more interesting. I'd seen only a few necromancer spells, so

I was tempted to listen in more, but I'm working against the clock here.

Who knows if Eunice will actually act as Ralphus expects? Looking back on it, she wasn't surprised by the fact I used soul steal at the master level. This was something that gave Barzealis a heart attack. She also didn't seem impressed that I drained the blood elemental or that I was even there in the first place. I could feel my pulse again as my heart raced.

She knew! She was probably already aware of my existence, but that could have just been from Barzealis. She wouldn't have sent anyone to my town, would she? No, if it was just Barzealis' words then she would have to search. All she would have is a vague direction. The cave is a long ways away from my town and I think that's the only place he knew about. Let's just hope Ralphus finds my finger, then I can stop worrying about my people's safety, at least for now.

I looked at the map Ralphus made. Shit, he said this was another building didn't he? So all this stair climbing was for naught. I looked out a window. There were multiple spires and many buildings surrounding a large courtyard. It's like castle, a college, and a giant hotel had a baby. How the hell am I supposed to figure this out?

Time to swallow my pride and do the only thing that makes sense.

"Mors!"

"Yes master!" She appeared and curtsied.

"I know we have tons of necromancer souls from the book. Surely one of them knows how to get to the damn quarters."

She disappeared for a moment and reappeared.

"The information is old and there are several newer buildings that weren't there before but it used to be the building across the way, the one that has a slight dome on top."

"Ah, so that's why Ralphus drew it like that. The building itself had a swirling spire that looked majestic, as if it had been crafted out of mana itself. But still, no matter how many times I look at it, it looks like an ice-cream cone. I guess I can't unsee that now. Thanks Mors!"

At this rate if I were to go back down the stairs and through all those long halls I would probably be caught up in another class change before reaching the bottom.

Yeah, screw this. Shortcut time!

I took off my robe and folded it up, I didn't want it to split from what's coming next. I pulled myself up onto the window ledge.

"Master! You don't intend to—"

I jumped.

Chapter 14

Oh shit oh shit oh shit!

CALMING EFFECT!

I hit the ground with a resounding crunch, my blood and brains scattering on the cobblestone of the courtyard.

That fucking hurts! Why the hell didn't I think to turn undead first!?

It took a few minutes for me to reform my body, the entire time fighting with the blood elemental who was trying to reform himself now that he had an out.

That reminds me, I still need to talk to that guy. Having someone fighting you from the inside out is like giving a Judas a new knife and a piggyback ride.

My body finally mended and my lungs drew in their first breaths of courtyard air.

A girl lay face down in the dirt while a haggard zombie stood shakily beside her, staring at nothing in particular.

I shifted my way through the cracked stones and made sure I didn't land on anyone.

Oh yeah, witnesses. Luckily unless someone was making their way up that massive staircase or peeping out their windows from one of the other buildings I should be fine. But this poor girl didn't seem to be so lucky.

I knelt beside her and the zombie greeted me with a "Ungh!" I returned his greeting and he stumbled back a few feet.

Huh, I guess I speak zombie. Makes sense, I guess.

I pulled back the girl's hood and melded my finger to her skin. She was fine, no abnormal health problems. She must have just passed out. I sat her on the bench and used fleshcrafting to wake her.

Her eyes shot open and darted to the spot where I'd landed, then back to me before she started to scream. I put my hand over her mouth and contemplated using my knockout mist to put her back to sleep. No, we'll try talking first.

"Hello, my name is John. You may be a little freaked out, but I'm fine and so are you. So do me a favor and please, please don't screech at me when I move my hand."

I felt her body shaking. *Yep, this isn't going to go well. She just saw a guy splatter himself on the ground, then she woke up to me with my hand on her mouth.*

I slowly moved my hand and she began shrieking. I put my hand back and removed it a few more times making a sort of musical tune until she began running out of lung capacity.

"That was fun, are you done yet?"

She inhaled deeply and it was time for round two. I put my finger on her lower lip and moved it up and down.

"Bububububub."

I couldn't help but laugh at this point and somehow she stopped screaming and moved on to hyperventilating.

Aaaand she's out again.

I awakened her once more. "Come on, lady, you're not a fainting goat, are you?"

This time she looked a little calmer but she hugged her robes tight around herself.

I put my robes and hood back on and sat down next to her. "See, it's just us necromancers here."

She scooted away and fell off the bench. I picked her back up, mended her damages and sat her back on the bench. She made an 'eep' noise the moment I touched her but made no move to struggle. *There's either something wrong with this girl, or she doesn't know if I'm friend or foe.*

"Again, my name is John. Sorry for all the scares, but please promise me you won't tell anyone about this."

She nodded and stared at the ground. She looked like a dog that had been mistreated by its master. It's a look I've seen from many people, both here and in my original world. This girl's been hurt before.

"That's a nice zombie you have there. What's his name?"

"Wi..." She glanced at the zombie who was repeatedly walking into the wall beside us. "Willfred."

Oh, that's a name that could come from earth.

"That's a nice name, so, what are you doing out here? You should have been in class."

"I...reading."

"You...reading, huh?" I looked down at her robes; they were ripped and stitched in several places. The tips of her fingers were all covered by bandages and she had a large tome hanging from her waist by an old leather belt.

I could vaguely sense that she was a follower of mine, but it was a dull sensation. In fact this place was riddled with extremely dull sensations of my followers. It's like they're worshipping me, but not *me*. I expected this place would be teeming with followers of the dark god, but no. It seems to have been corrupted somehow.

"Well, master of Willfred. If you guide me to Dip—I mean Harolf's quarters, I'll make you a robe. Free of charge. I'll even do something for Will over there. What do you say?"

Her eyes lit up for a second and she nodded slowly.

Yay, now I don't have to aimlessly wander the quarters following a crudely drawn sketch.

As we walked the seemingly endless spiral staircase, she opened up a little and I found out her name was Eolania. It rang a bell from those hall-blockers' conversation earlier. I looked back at Willfred. Nope, not dandruff, maggots. Tiny maggots. Willfred had definitely seen better days.

We finally arrived at the gaudiest door I had ever seen. Red satin lined its frame, which was adorned with golden threads and inset with...English writing!

I looked at it in amazement. *My god!*

"I'm afraid I don't know how to get in. I've tried before, but..." She trailed off at the end.

"That's okay, I do. Open Saysa me!" *Damn you again, Dipshit, for making me say that out loud.*

There was a click and the door slid open, grinding a few gemstones off the fabric that lined it. We walked in and I pushed the realization that Dipshit may have been from earth to the back of my mind. I already knew from the suit in Riverbrook that other people from my world had been here, but now wasn't not the time to deal with that, and Dipshit was already in my mana pool, so it's not like I could speak to him about it.

She chanted a short verse and the room illuminated with green light. I guess that's standard here. Probably similar to the torches but togglable.

The room was massive and filled with fabrics in all shades, the majority of which were black, reds and grays. There was a table that had needles of various sizes and shapes, as well as an assortment of scissors. There were also several looms of different sizes; some looked quite sophisticated.

"Well, have a seat and I'll make you something. Do you have any preferences? I can literally do anything this guy could do."

She shyly went over what she wanted and what she thought would look good on Wilfred, and I began working. The fact that my tailor skill came from Dipshit and this was his shop made things go by fast, and I was finished in only an hour. Not that robes were hard to make. On hers I also added pleats to the bottom and an inset V belt. She was now the epitome of necromancer fashion. She walked off to one of the curtained off areas to change as I modified a robe for Willfred.

As I was fitting it to him, part of his scalp fell away, revealing his infestation. I fought the urge to gag. *Nope, not*

doing this. I parted with a bit of my stored flesh and used blend on him.

Well, well. He's not a bad looking fellow now. He was maybe in his late fifties. He had a kind face and laugh lines. It's good to see he probably enjoyed life while he had it. I revised the robe into a trenchcoat and made him a simple black shirt and black pants. I then found out that dressing a zombie is both creepy and difficult. By the time I was done I felt a tug on my robes and turned to see a smiling Eolania. I couldn't tell before, but she's actually kinda cute.

"Those robes look great on you!"

She nodded excitedly then noticed Wilfred. Her mouth fell open and tears started forming at the corners of her eyes.

"You fixed him?"

"Yeah, he needed an overhaul. I hope it's okay."

She hugged me and in a quivering voice eked out a thank-you. *I can't help but feel like there's a story here. But right now I've already spent enough time on this. I can always find out later after Eunice is taken care of.*

"H...how did you!?"

"If you promise to keep it a secret I'll tell you."

"Yes, please!"

"I'm the dark god, and my skills include molding flesh like clay and..." I sighed. "Tailoring."

She laughed. "You're funny, but if you study here, then we'll meet again. And then someday, I hope you'll tell me the truth."

"Deal, now you should go back to class and show off your new clothes. I don't want to see you in the courtyard during class again."

She shivered as if remembering earlier. Whoops, I may have brought back some trauma.

"Oh, about earlier... It was all a dream."

She shook her head as if not sure if she should nod or say no. I gently guided her to the door followed by Wilfred and

closed it behind them.

"Master, why spend so much time on her?"

"That might have seemed pointless, but the fact is if I want to oust Eunice, I need to win everyone over, and leaving a happy follower is better than leaving a traumatized witness. Plus she guided me here, so I have no complaints. Anyway, I'll always support the underdog, and those girls in the hallway rubbed me the wrong way."

Mors smiled and vanished as I began searching the room. I knocked on all the walls and looked behind all the shelves, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Finally I came to a locked drawer in a desk in the corner of the room.

I ripped off the front and pulled out a leather-bound book.

On the front written in English was *Harold's super special journal of memories!*

I cringed but opened it nonetheless.

Day 1

I'm keeping this diary to test if information stays after waking up. If it does then I should be able to prove that my vision and John's work is real, if only to myself.

I woke up in a place called the Dark Academy. I've always liked playing as a necromancer, and that's apparently what I am here. I got the secondary job of tailor. I'm not sure why, but it seems like it will be useful with my stats.

Today's code is 1-7-14 My daughter's birthday.

I'll also keep a journal when I wake up about what happens here with matching codes.

I sat there shaking. This was Harold's journal. My friend Harold! He was Dipshit. If only I had known, maybe I could have spoken to him back in that cave. Oh god, what had I put him through!?

I nervously thumbed through the journal.

Day 68

Things are going great, at least in here. I've tried to convince John that our invention is real, but he says he doesn't see anything when he wears the helmet. I don't know what to make of it. I almost want to bring in others, but things have gotten weird here. When I'm not wearing the helmet my avatar apparently still does things on its own. I've often logged in to find things I'd rather not recount. Apparently Harolf is a bit of an ass, and I'm constantly cleaning up after him.

I also made a shocking discovery. I don't know if it came from my mind as I'm a bit of a history buff but there seems to be another person here with knowledge from my world. But I let slip a comparison to Saint Michael and I noticed our academy's master Eunice's eyes light up.

She approached me later, asking all sorts of questions including how I knew that name, and I spilled the beans.

I think she was likely created from my mind, but what if this world shares information between people? Would a second person see the same world as me if they wore a helmet?

If not, then what have I tapped into? I get the feeling that I might have discovered something far more complicated than a simple game. Of course no one will ever believe me, so all I can do is bite my tongue and wait until we are ready for an open beta to find out what everyone else experiences.

I've decided to pour the rest of my savings into this project and put my faith in John to refine it.

Sorry, old friend, I failed you there. If anything I only proved how unsafe the helmet was. I only hope that the one I punished wasn't you but your avatar. Still, why did Eunice react to the reference to Saint Michael? I flipped to the end.

After what happened with John, I no longer want to risk wearing this helmet. I've just become too attached to this

world to let it go without saying goodbye. Tomorrow I sell our prototypes to a swedish gaming company in hopes that I can recoup some of my investments for my daughter's sake. I had full faith in everything here, and there is no doubt on my part that this world is real, but I have more than my own future to think about.

Eunice has been a great help to me here, even offering me a position as her personal tailor and access to an artifact called the Book of Souls. I still haven't opened it because it gives off an ominous feeling.

Still, though she never directly verified it, I can't shake the feeling that she's from my world. I had hoped to have more time to look into it, but there's nothing else I can do for now.

Well, the timing works out okay because my avatar apparently did something to piss off everyone in the academy and it seems like I wouldn't be able to continue playing anyway. I will sell this helmet and mourn the loss of my friend tomorrow. For now all I can do is look forward to a better future for my family and try to recoup my losses.

Thank you, my old friend. I still don't remember what happened, but at least I'm not the murderer I thought I was. I wish I was able to meet your expectations, but this world really is dangerous and you got out before you faced anything too bad.

The thing that puzzles me is why did she give him the book of souls? Neither Harolf nor Harold the tailor would have benefited from it, so why?

My best guess is that she wanted him to use it, but using it meant giving up your soul, so what was she hoping to gain? Harold's soul, Dipshit's soul? I have no idea.

I closed the journal and placed it back into the broken drawer. There weren't any secret passages here, only another dead end.

"For what it's worth, Harold, you were right, this world is real. If I'd only believed you then, we could have talked about it together."

I left the room, my mind on the world I'd left as I made my way back to the parts shop.

Ralphus was already back and in the midst of a heated argument with his apprentice.

"How could you give up the incantation! Because of you I could die if he tells Lang."

"But I thought I was dead and he showed me such marvelous creatures the likes of which you can only imagine! If only I still had my notes I'd show you, sir. They seemed to have the intellect of a human and the properties of many different solids and liquids. And their song, nya, nya nya."

"That's it, your zombie-girl room privileges are revoked! I'm changing the incantatio—" He stopped speaking the moment he noticed me. "Welcome back! Any luck?"

I shook my head, choosing to ignore the conversation I walked in on. "As always, more questions than answers."

I turned towards the cat-lover. "Do you know where the finger is?"

He shook his head. "I never took in a finger, who would? We deal in quality parts here, not tiny pieces. A finger wouldn't even be worth a single copper."

"But did you see the guy? I mean was anyone trying to trade you a finger for something? His name was... Marrow I believe."

They both winced and Ralphus removed his mask to rub the bridge of his nose. He shook his head in frustration and breathed out slowly as he spoke. "That's Eunice's second nephew."

"Shit, then that means...?"

"Yeah, that he wouldn't have that much trouble meeting her. You said this guy was a cutthroat?"

"That's what he called himself, repeatedly."

"Nope, Marrow is an assassin and a spy. He does any dirty work for her outside of the Dark Academy."

I thought back on it. He did seem out of place with the other two, and he began acting friendly far too fast for someone who just saw two of their fellows murdered. So his aim all along was likely to gather info, and maybe even kill me. But why? Oh, yeah! "What about Barzealis?"

Ralphus' laugh lines disappeared as he his lips curled into a frown. "No idea, but considering that Marrow found you, he must have spilled the beans even before I left. Marrow was likely hanging around the Mercenaries' guild just waiting for a strange request to come in before he found you."

My pulse quickened. "Then—"

Ralphus slammed his fist on the table. "Then we're all fucked—you, me, Lang and your town. She knows everything!"

I replayed the facts in my head. She had decided to take on the cult—why? And the fact that there were no black robes or dead necromancers outside seemed to indicate that perhaps she went alone. Yet at the same time, where did the rest of the cultists go? I mentally counted the bloody red robes; there were maybe five. It takes more than five people to surround a forest.

I needed answers, and luckily enough I had a witness right here.

"Ralphus, I'm borrowing your zombie-girl room."

He cleared his throat as his cheeks lit up to a bright crimson. "Uh, yeah, that's... Don't tell Lang!"

I grabbed a couple of chairs and headed into the room.

Chapter 15

I sat across from a very crestfallen elf-shaped blood elemental. More than anyone I had seen, he looked like a traditional elven man. His hair was long and tied back, his ears long and pointed, even more so than Liz's. But his expressions and the way he sat didn't say Elvish at all.

"So, what happened in the forest?"

He raised only his eyes to look at me, his head still hung in a stupor. Did I perhaps damage him too much when I diluted him with my bloodstream?

I snapped my fingers. "Hey, Legolas, can you hear me?"

His eyes shot up as his face contorted in rage. "Did you say Legolas!?"

I jerked back; could that mean that this world also had an elf with that name?

His fingers became blades of blood as he spoke again. "Like the Lord of the—"

My mouth fell open. "Yes! My god, are you from earth!?"

Blades and spikes formed, slashing out in all directions as he charged towards me, showing an anger on a much higher level than he showed Eunice.

Luckily the chains held and the metal plate protected my core as me and the zombies in the room were reduced to fleshy piles of meat.

I reformed myself and added the bones and flesh of those that surrounded me fortifying myself against further attack. I absorbed half of his body, once again thinning it down in my now ample bloodstream.

He reformed now as a tiny version of what he once was, but continued to rage.

"Oy, scrappy doo. You're not getting anywhere like this, so hop your tiny ass back up on that chair and we can have

a conversation."

He continued attacking until I had drained him to a size where Mors could kick his ass. Speaking of which...

"Mors."

"Yes, Master!"

"Can I kill this guy and interrogate him in soul form?"

Her tiny brows crinkled. "Not that I know of. A blood elemental can only be killed a few ways. A strong fire spell to dry them out, being consumed, or being diluted. And all of those ways mean that there's no soul left to be taken."

"Fine, thank you, Mors."

I continued to splatter the tiny blood elemental against the metal walls each time he charged.

"Sorry little buddy, but I can live without blood—but you can't. At least tell me why the hell you're so pissed off at me all of a sudden."

He finally stopped his attack, but his blood blades continued to spin around him. "Do you know who I am?" He said in a tiny voice.

"...Legol--"

"No!" He resume his attack, this time acting more like a fluid than a person. I formed a paddle of bone out of my hand and proceeded to play the most bizarre game of handball I had ever dreamed of.

As the time passed his motions became slower, and it took him longer and longer to reform.

"Look, I don't know why you hate LoTR so damn much, but for what it's worth I wasn't trying to offend you."

He stopped and slumped against the metal walls. "It's not that. Someone from earth took something from me that I can never get back. A person that meant more to me than my very soul." He paused to examine my face. "I swore that if anyone recognized me I would kill them! It was all that kept me going. That and that woman's tenacity."

"You mean Eva?"

His tiny brows clenched once more as he mouthed the name back. "How do you know that name!?"

I put my hand out to block a tiny jet of blood. It didn't even pierce the bone surface. The tiny rivulet spun in the air and rejoined the elemental as he laughed to himself.

"I guess this is the end, huh?" He shot two more pointless streams at me. "So this is my limit. Well demon, I'm done... Take me to hell!"

This guy is dramatic!

"Nope, not a demon. In fact I'm starting to get tired of people calling me that. I don't know your story and I'm not trying to, but there are questions I need to ask and I feel like we have an enemy in common."

He gestured for me to go on.

"Alright, what happened in the forest? Did Eunice attack solo?"

He laughed to himself again. "Eunice? Ah, the crinkly she-bitch? She came out with a large group of guys like you, but not. After she killed..." He paused for a moment, choked up on what he was saying. "Killed Eva, she ran back into the forest. Our people followed her as corpses, and though I cut down her friends, we ended up in that basement. I think you know what happened from there."

I leaned forward. "Guys like me?"

"Yeah, the ones that got back up after I cut them in half. None of them were as talkative though. I didn't see where the rest of the vermin scattered. I was bent on one thing. Killing her!"

Liz will kill me for this, but I need an olive branch. "I can bring Eva back. All I need is for Eunice to relinquish it or die."

He smiled for a moment, but as if hit by reality his expression returned to a neutral one. "Ah, I don't give a fat fuck about her. She was only distracting me from the one who really matters. All she ever did was manipulate people. I called her on her shit, even hurt her, but somehow she still

got under my skin. No matter what I did to her, she wouldn't let go of me." Sadness returned and he slumped once more. "She may have been the only one to accept me. But that doesn't mean we were good for each other. There's only one woman I ever loved, but some old psycho with a hard-on for swords took her away."

Wait a minute. No, there's no way! ...This is Sid, and he's a follower. I feel sick.

Calming effect!

I breathed out a slow, steady stream of fog. Sid, that bastard. I know everything after speaking with Caroline. He ruined her life until he finally took it and somehow he blames me!? This thing, this "man," is irredeemable.

I felt rage building, but it was suppressed by cold darkness.

A chilling sensation wrapped around me. "He's been through enough now, don't you think?"

I closed my eyes and faced the darkness. "No, he is human trash. Let me wipe this scum from the face of this world. He trapped her in an abusive relationship with addiction and threats. He wouldn't even let her see her father on his deathbed. And when she finally had enough, he killed her!"

"This one deserves redemption."

"But he's still the same foul-mouthed sociopath he used to be. Have you heard him?"

"I've seen him. Look at his reactions; he suffers. Both from past mistakes and new losses. He would trade his soul to make things right, so take it!"

I opened my eyes to see the tiny Sid still slumped, cradling his head in his hands.

Fine, let's put it all on the table. "Sid, you killed Caroline, not me!"

Sid's body froze before bursting forth at me in a barrage of blood that pierced my skin and hit the wall behind me.

He reformed, bigger now, and began to chant as he stared at me, rage and desperation in his eyes. "Exsan—"

Petrifying Gaze!

He froze once more, his eyes wide.

"If you truly are a follower, then see what it is you worship. You put her through the same thing, didn't you?"

I absorbed Sid while fighting the bile in the back of my throat. If he survives this, then maybe with some new humility I will let him meet Caroline again.

I wanted to vomit, to wash my hands of him and be done, but I spared him for now.

There was a knock on the door followed by Ralphus's voice. "Is everything alright in there? I know about your 'condition' and all."

"I'm not humping your zombie girls. I'm not Bob."

There was a warm laugh as I grabbed the two mangled chairs and made my way back out.

Afterwards we sat and he asked me what I learned.

"Eunice apparently attacked the cult with a number of high-level flesh golems, high enough that they could mend themselves after being cut in half. She killed the ones at the front and the golems likely chased the rest somewhere else while she lured the blood elemental inside."

Ralphus looked stunned. "We need to go! If she had flesh golems that strong, then Lang and your people aren't safe anymore!"

"No, Bob, Threscia, and Liz were outside. I have faith in each of them. Eunice underestimated us. Just like what she did with Sid."

Ralphus raised his eyebrow, "Sid?"

"The blood elemental, he's another person from my world. I don't know what was happening in that apartment complex, but it wouldn't surprise me if Bob's daughter-in-law showed up soon."

There was a knock at the door. Ralphus placed his mask back on and cautiously opened it.

A tall bald man with what I can only describe as eyeliner burst in, knocking Ralphus to the ground. "Master Eunice requests the presence of... 'The Dark God.'" There was a condescending tone to his words, making them sound like ridicule.

I activated soul steal and stood slowly. His bulbous eyes threatened to burst from his skull as he spoke. "I, I'm sorry for my rudeness. It's as Barzealis said, you are a master of soul steal. It's just that there are many who make zealous claims—but to see it with my own eyes." He placed his hand on his chest and bowed. "Please, come with me. She awaits you."

I canceled soul steal and followed the tall stranger. Ralphus looked at me desperately as if he had something to say but stayed his tongue as his gaze moved on to the tall man.

"Please, Master?"

"John."

"Master John. I meant no disrespect. I was tasked with proving you were in fact who you said you were, but now that seems moot. Whether or not you're a god, you have displayed a skill beyond what any of us are capable of, and I will show you the respect you deserve. This one calls himself Aldrueth. I am a fifth-generation necromancer. My family was responsible for many of the innovations you see here in the academy."

There was the faintest of sensations from him. Like the girl earlier, he felt like he was almost a follower but somehow his faith had been diverted. It bothered me that in this place that should be almost a monument to the dark god there are almost no followers barring the still-frozen Sid who now flows through my veins.

We made our way once more up the near-endless spiral staircase and long halls of classrooms.

"Don't you have an elevator or something by now? All it would take is a pulley and a few near-equal counterweights."

Maybe a break for individual floors."

"Oh, I've heard of these contraptions before in the halls of Luks. Have you ever heard the story of Luks?"

"No, I'm not exactly from here."

"Well, perhaps a story will help us pass the time until our destination. Luks was a mighty castle in the kingdom of light. Its king was said to be a genius who made many things which made his people's lives better. Of course with progress there are always those that will envy those who innovate. Though it would surely be convenient, these stairs are like this for a reason. If someone wished to take our master's head, they would have to contend with each level of the academy. Whereas if we had an elevator they might get a reprieve or skip levels as they did in Luks. The wise King's head rolled long before the guards could even respond."

"I feel like you skipped a bunch of stuff in the middle, but I get what you're saying."

Yep, this was like a dungeon. Having the more advanced classes and students up higher meant that if a large force ever got through the barrier they would be exhausted by the time they reached the Master. Which would no doubt lead to an easy victory for anyone even half decent at magic. There is a massive flaw to this, though.

"What about catapults or trebuchets from the outside? There's no need to physically besiege this place, you know."

He stopped as his face contorted in confusion. "Cata-whats?"

Wow, note to self. This world is unaware of siege weapons.

"Nevermind, what of strong magics that could destroy this tower?"

He guffawed. "No, no. There are many, many more barriers than just the dark one that surrounds this place, and even if all the king's mages tried at once, they'd never match us in mana. We have a deep reserve, after all, and

the servants of Theresa aren't allowed to use soul prisons, so our advantage is overwhelming."

"I see." My mind recalled my battle with the Duke's legion. If they really did have multiple barriers of different elements, it's definitely possible. I guess this time I'm lucky to already be inside.

After another hour or so of climbing and some pointless banter I discovered he had a love of architecture and a pet demon snake named Pookie. We finally reached the massive metal doors that led to the final hallway. He chanted in old Therossian as I admired the intricate carvings in the walls and the designs emblazoned on the door.

I would compare them to the evolution of death: bodies in various stages of decay with robed figures pulling jade souls from them. There was always a figure in the background, but its form was obscured even though I was staring right at it. It seemed to shift and change as a green light flowed through it.

I had a feeling that I was being watched by something ancient and terrible. But inside me another emotion surged. A mix of regret and anger. The doors opened silently as if pulled by an unseen force.

"Please." Aldrueth bowed as he extended his arm toward the far door. "She awaits you in her office."

As I stepped into the long hallway, the doors shut behind me. Green torches lit up along on the walls as if matching my pace, and soon I stood outside the ebony doors of Eunice's office.

I knocked twice, though with the thickness of the stone I doubt the sound made it through before I entered.

Eunice was there. As Ralphus predicted, she had apparently been using a high-level flesh golem to try to graft flesh onto her frame as I had done for Barzealis, but with disastrous effects. She looked like a woman made of paper mache in gowns of the highest finery. My mind

flashed back to Harold's journal. She may be a person from my world after all.

I bowed in the same way that Aldrueth had done for me before, but in response all I got was an icy stare.

She spoke in an ethereal voice like Barzealis before her. "Please, come, sit." She gestured to a chair in front of her enormous desk.

I sat in the red satin chair in front of her. This too was likely something Dipshit made, given its gaudiness.

She crossed her bony fingers "I brought you here because I'm aware of what you did for Barzealis. I'd like the same."

I smiled. "You want to be a young man with black curly hair and a respectable beard?"

She sat silently, her jaw open. Are there crickets here? I swear I just heard them.

"No... I mean living flesh. Young flesh. Curvaceous flesh." She paused for a moment as if savoring her words.

Oh, this is gross. There's something perverse about the way she said it that I just can't mentally dismiss. It's like your grandma talking about her sex life.

I fought back the revulsion. "Well, I can definitely do that. But where is Barzealis? He's a follower and benefactor of mine. I won't do anything without a guarantee of his safe return."

"He's fine," she purred as she slowly dragged her finger across the table. "I only wanted the secret to how he regained youth."

Let me add that to my delete folder in my memories.

"Then where is he?" I asked as nicely as I could.

"I'll show you as soon as you help me," she cooed.

I could already see this conversation was going in circles. I thought about trying to intimidate her. I'd already played my hand when I saw her in the basement, but she didn't seem all that fazed by soul steal or any other talent I

displayed. No, somehow I needed to navigate this without brute force.

"I restored your students in the basement. Wouldn't it be interesting if the rest of the academy learned what they had to say about your encounter with the blood elemental and the obvious benefit to using exsanguinate on him?"

Her pseudo-provocative behavior stopped, and it looked like she'd just swallowed a bug. "Very well, 'Dark God,' I'll show you everything."

She rose and walked to a wall featuring a sculpture of a bifurcated man. She inserted no fewer than ten red ambers into his wounds. My blood boiled as I considered the disregard for life. Ten people's souls consumed, just to open a door.

I stifled my disgust and followed her down a hidden staircase. Both this and the zombie basement. *I will make her into a torch and hang it from the academy doors! Wait, is that even possible for a lich?* I realized then that she was self-bound. In other words her soul was untouchable for me.

With a growing sense of dread, I marched down behind her.

We reached the bottom and she once again opened a door with red amber.

Calming effect!

Shit, I'm starting to get a little messed up.

We entered a dark chamber by the far wall and I saw Barzealis in a gibbet. His body had large holes gouged out of it. His jaw was missing and his eyes had been removed, leaving only the flaming green orbs of a lich.

She approached him and spun the gibbet on its chain. "He's not able to speak anymore, but you see, this is him. At the very least, he lives."

I saw the pain in his eyes as garbled words trickled forth. Their meaning was lost, but the feeling I got was a desperate plea.

I couldn't hide my anger anymore. "Why did you remove his jaw!? What is it you wanted to hide from me?"

"Hide? Nothing. He wouldn't speak to me, so I made it so he wouldn't speak at all."

"If you don't produce his jaw in the next ten seconds, I'm ripping off yours and giving it to him!"

"Ha, you think you--"

I rushed forward using IPT and fleshcrafting. I caught her lower jaw mid-speech and gave it a swift yank, snapping it free. She screamed as I began to twist it off.

I stopped and jammed it back in, mending it. "Do you understand now? Maybe you've forgotten what it's like to be beholden to someone, but if you don't watch your tongue here, I'll rip it out without blinking an eye. Entitlement and useless delusions of self grandeur. Just how many people like that do you think I've killed by now? Nobles, commoners, mages. In death, they all shit their pants." I grew my hand and wrapped her skull giving it a squeeze. "And don't think I don't know how to kill a lich. That's all you are in my eyes. A thing to be killed. Tell me why I should stay my hand!"

"No!" She shrieked. "I never meant it to be like this. Forgive me! He and I have a history. His jaw is there." She pointed desperately at a table in the far wall. "I was only trying to unravel how you managed your feat."

I sealed her lips together with fleshcrafting and walked to the table. There were several chunks of flesh almost indistinguishable in the bloody soup that bathed everything.

I used fleshcrafting to absorb everything, including a bloody jaw. I returned to Barzealis and mended him, restarting his heart.

His mouth moved, his expression dark with grief, but no words followed.

I turned back to Eunice who had moved to the far corner of the room. Blackened blood dripped from her now split lips

as she chanted something in a language I didn't know. A chill went down my back as I ran towards her.

With a resounding thrum I was flung back by green energy as she thrust her hand into a gaping maw on the wall. Several red ambers fell to the ground as a pattern on the floor illuminated in green flames.

My body grew heavy and as I fought to stand the flames grew higher, reaching the ceiling.

I could still hear her chanting now in many voices and one familiar one. A voice I'd hoped never to hear again. Deep and dark, full of rage and venom. The Book of Souls.

My body would no longer listen to me as I felt my soul come out of sync. *No, not my soul! All my souls!*

My arms fell and all I could do was watch as she pulled a gray object from her sleeve. As her chant stopped she laughed softly.

My mouth opened wide but the words continued until it ripped free and fell to the floor. "A lich does not need a jaw to speak. Now I'll repay you for how you treated my fragment."

She picked up her jaw and entered the circle that restrained me. "A flesh golem can only ever be a flesh golem. How do you think Harolf got the book? Where do you think your so called core came from? You're not the first one to have it, it was simply a means to gather more souls, a limitless storage." She stood over me, dripping her rancid blood in my face. Her voice returned to that of Eunice. "Now, make me beautiful before I strip it all away."

My hand moved on its own and I began to fleshcraft her against my will.

I retreated into my mind as my body continued to mold her.

"...Mors."

Mors appeared and fell to her knees. "Mas...ter."

I tried to will myself forward but couldn't. "What's happening?"

"She, no... It's controlling me. All the souls are being manipulated." Her face turned sad. "I don't know for how long you can trust me."

"I'll always trust you, you're the other me."

Tears flowed down her small face. "I'm not in control of myself. If this keeps up I won't be me anymore," she sobbed. "The time we shared together when you were recuperating was the happiest time of my life. I didn't know what feelings were when you first mad mee, but through you I felt it all."

Her green wings lost their color and returned to being gray. "Master?"

"Yes, Mors." I felt the black liquid pouring.

"Can you hold me again?"

I pushed with all my power to reach out for her, but I couldn't move. Not even in my own mind.

"No, I... I can't reach you."

She fell to the ground and crawled towards me. "I... Is it okay if I don't want to die?"

What is this shit! The dam burst and my anger filled every fiber of my being. The blackness began to boil as I fought against what bound me.

My eyes opened against my will as Eunice's now-young face greeted me.

"No, no, no." She tsked. "We can't have that. It looks like she was right. The old god's come to play."

She removed a strange golden object on a chain. It looked like a two-armed cross with a tree behind it. A light burst from it and I could feel it burning me, but there was no damage.

"She might be a bitch, but we have an agreement. I don't know why, but it seems like you were actually bound to the dark god." She grabbed my chin and shook my head. "Such a poor soul." She frowned mockingly at me. "All it means to me is that I can't kill you without releasing that thing onto the world." She laughed. "Who would think that the bitch

got enough followers to seal you. All she did was wipe out a few knife-ears and win a popularity contest." She looked into my eyes. "Oh, what's this, you don't understand?"

Mors!!

"You've lived for what? Twenty, thirty, forty years? You have the stink of a young soul. I've been around for thousands of years. I, or rather my god, have been around since this world's birth. He comes from you. In a way all things do. But I've been building this place since man first learned of magic. I took your followers—the god of souls trumps a god that only offers cold silence. Such a boring god, the god of darkness. Nihilistic empathy is the same as assisted suicide. Here." She placed the symbol she was holding around my neck. Everything began to turn white as her voice faded. "I'm done with you for now; enjoy Theressa's binding."

My eyes closed, and Mors lay in front of me, fading slowly. She eked out a last sentence. "Say...you..loved..."

"I love you, Mors, please stay with—"

She vanished without a trace. The final look on her tear-stained face was concern. For me. Her final thoughts were for me!

The black slowly gave way to white until it was only a shadow at my feet.

I felt a strong force. The dark god bubbled up and covered me. "Use the spell!"

"What spell!?"

"Retreat into another life."

I invoked the past life spell. The blank space I'd been avoiding vanished as portraits spun past me like a film strip. All but one blackened. "You're not ready to see the rest. This one! It's the first time we spoke."

I grabbed onto it and pulled it inside myself. My heart felt heavy. I'll never forgive her or her god for what they've done! The black tears continued to flow as my very identity slipped away.

Chapter 16 — John

The day she burned was the same day as I lost my faith. We fought for them, we died for them, and above all she stood proud. A beautiful symbol of faith and mercy, but they burned her all the same, fearing the power she had over the people.

As she kicked and screamed against the flames, she cried, and with each tear my hatred grew. She wasn't a warrior, she was only a girl. She hated fighting, she praised the same gods, but now she burned as a heretic and they watched with perverse gins as her porcelain skin bubbled and her cries of agony fell on the deaf ears of the crowd.

I'd snuck in here earlier. I couldn't even be here for her when she needed me most lest I be burned beside her.

Though I was married, she was my only love. We'd never embraced, but I couldn't risk her purity. Even now she dies a virgin. Untouched by man. To me she was so much more than a person. She was a saint! Yet they burn her; they burn my love in front of everyone.

Would a merciful God really allow this? Would he force me to watch a just woman die in his name for crimes she didn't commit? She finally passed out from the pain and I vowed in my heart to become a monster.

I will stand for everything that is unholy. I will seek an audience with the devil himself and correct this sickening mistake. Even if I have to kill the very God I am supposed to worship, I will strike them down! I will devote myself to the conjuring of devils and the downfall of the church.

Many years flew by, and my time was filled with absinthe and debauchery. I could no longer call myself a follower of God as I fell deeper into depression. My life ended with hers, and my fortune now follows. I've come to take delight in the

suffering of the innocent and to revel in the thought of sending them to hell.

I sacrificed many to try to contact devils, but none have appeared. Children mostly—I take delight in the fact that they will never harm me. I send her gifts like this, her own cherubim to cheer her up while my coffers go down. I kiss them each goodbye and keep the sweetest parts to offer up. Still no devils to consort with.

No Faustian bargains, no Mephistopheles. Perhaps I realized long ago that the only thing I got from this was self-gratification. I proved that they can't detect a person of pure malice. An embodiment of evil, right under their noses. I curse their God nightly and defy him with each victim, but still they praise me because I am beloved by the king.

Over time I've grown jaded by my murders. The absinthe no longer thrills me. It now only acts as an unbidden sleep-aid, but still I cannot stop. I realize now that I can't bring her back and any effort I use is wasted in its infancy. There is no God controlling our actions. There is only that selfish thing that is man.

I've captured a member of the clergy who dared to flaunt his piety to me. Looking down on my current financial stature. Tonight, he too will join my hall of victims and I will delight in his torment.

I bade him to pray. I said, Pray to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to stay my blade. He bowed and soon his tears were clouded by the blood that sprayed from his throat. I took great pleasure as I thrust myself into his wound, climaxing at the very moment of his death. God holds no place here in Tiffauges. There is only me, my servants, and the hollowed eyes of the long-dead innocent.

I wiped the blood from my loins. "Your God has given you to me, just as he gave her to the flames. Justice is an illusion shared only by the weak and the foolish. Burn this one; he was well known."

Easy days passed as the suspicion of my acts rose amongst the clergy.

It seems my crimes have finally caught up with me. There is but one final victim before I go to God. "Satan, Ba'al, Astaroth, Beelzebub, I beseech you. Any god or demon who hears this, witness my devotion and enjoy the hypocrisy that follows. I provide to you the grand summation of my victims, the flesh you requested, in great abundance. Give me a sign, let me know that my efforts have borne fruit! I give now my life in accordance with your whims. All I ask is your assurance that she will be freed of her burden of sin. Let her be known as the saint she was always meant to be and give her new life where she will have the power to defend what she believes in, that no man may lay claim to her and her perfect beauty will last forever."

My burnt offering, my porcelain saint. I'm sure God welcomed you to his bosom, but I will die an easier death. Forgive me for taking the hangman's noose instead of the fire, but as you well know, I have always been and will continue to be selfish.

As I slumbered in my dungeon cell, there was a soft whisper on the wind, as if a phantom came to give me an audience.

The candle, my one source of light, extinguished as darkness surrounded me. It spoke of a calm descent into nothing. No devil, no god, but something else entirely. In soft whispers we spoke until the fires were lit and the noose was around my neck.

My last thoughts were quiet ones as I...

Chapter 17

I was once again in darkness. Something felt different. I wasn't just me anymore; now there was someone else's memories, a feeling of a life I didn't live. *Atrocities! I..I could never do those things!*

I roared at the dark god, cursing him. *Why did you force me to see that? Why did you make me remember such a sickening life?* My head spun and I lost focus. Something's different.

Mors!

Oh... That's right.

I sobbed, as it was the only thing I could do. Murder, rape, human sacrifices to the deaf ears of demons. The loss of my other half to some possessed necromancer. Even my rage has fled, leaving me alone with my grief.

I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't feel my body anymore.

Time passed as I struggled, screamed, ranted and called out, but all I found was blackness and my memories of Mors's final moments.

The dark god no longer speaks to me, but I still feel it inside. It doesn't stir, it doesn't respond. It only sleeps.

Like a sudden rush everything came back! *I feel my body, I feel the dark god stirring, but most of all I feel HUNGER!*

Finally I was able to open my eyes. The room was dim, familiar, though it now felt like a lifetime ago that I'd last seen it. I was still in that fetid room where Eunice took from me the person I relied on most. My body feels numb. I struggled to raise my hand and what I saw was withered and dry. My tendons snapped and cracked, protesting whenever I tried to move.

I'm so hungry!

Everything was blurry. A voice spoke as something warm and fluffy was tossed at my feet. I tore into it desperately, ripping flesh from bone as screams filled my ears. I savored its tender flesh as I swallowed with ecstasy.

Feasting is not to be underestimated.

My vision gradually returned and my eyes told me what I was eating. If only I could pluck them from my skull!

"Liz! No..."

I took the gag from her mouth as I desperately tried to mend what was left of her, but the chanting resumed and I fell powerless beside her.

She coughed up blood and her lips moved, mouthing something. "Not your fault."

I wanted to scream. I fought, but the dark god was silenced once more as the object was placed back around my neck.

The last thing I saw was Eunice holding a white staff as she spoke. "Theressa said not to let you eat, but I have other plans for you and I can't have you fading away. This one has been lingering outside for a long time now, killing my people and attacking my barrier. So I took her in the night. Oops, did you know her?" She laughed.

All I managed in response was a moan. *I will fucking tear her apart!*

"Well then, sleep well, flesh golem. I'll wake you when I have use for you."

In my bitter rage, the darkness once again gave way to the light and I lost all physical sensation. But this time I felt it minor, yet still perceptible. It now lived on me, and my rage, which now surmounted my sadness, fed it.

Mors, now Liz. I felt a desperation clawing at me, bidding me to kill. I focused on it, feeding with all I had experienced, including the life of evil deeds.

That which changed before now made itself clear. I grabbed hold to that intangible thread and pulled hard. It

finally became something I could see. I simplified what I was feeling into text.

Soul Affinities:

Dark: Originator

Death: Novice

Souls: Master

Unholy: Master (Only known user as confirmed by willing souls)

Infernal: ???

???: ???

Unholy? That's something new. Also, those question marks. Bob had those, maybe it's something to do with the past life spell. Some sort of magic that can't quite manifest yet.

I struggled to feel my mana, the number showed but it was grayed out. So, no mana but I also had no unholy spells. No, that wasn't exactly true, was it? The spells may not have worked for him there. But for me, here, perhaps they may help.

I visualized hundreds of spells and tried each while consuming my own soul for measly dregs of mana.

It ended in failure each time. And each time, my mind flashed Liz's face as she died. Her eye soft as she forgave me for...

My rage surged and I fed the dark god once more.

There is one thing the dark god does. One aspect I may use. I reached out into the white space, struggling with all my willpower, and as I was forced back in I managed to scrape it. Just a small scratch that led back to where I was.

I focused on that and thought of nothing but my will to consume the light.

Gradually the scratch expanded and splintered into a crack. Through that smallest of holes, blood trickled up, just a drop, but even a drop is progress.

There's something beneath this veneer of white. Its fleshy core beckons me. As I eroded and consumed the light, more and more red formed. Until a form bubbled up. The blood elemental?

No, it took the form of an elven huntress, her body skinny and scarred. She was missing an eye, but the one that gazed at me was sharp. She smiled at me before she began ripping off large chunks of white. With each second she grew as the light began to dim evermore. No, was it because I was now in her shadow? I could now move freely. I consumed all that she gave me and finally I felt it move.

The area went apocalyptically dim, like an eclipse, and all disappeared into the void. The elven maiden smiled as she grabbed the false sun from the sky and swallowed it.

She looked down at me as I floated up to face her. Her body was no longer skinny and scarred. She now had a dignified look, her face proud, her expression, one of gratitude.

She spoke in a powerful voice. "My followers are back, yet still I was trapped here in her hollow realm. She came from me, and coated my lessons in a thick shell of superficial light. You summoned me, filled with the blood of my kind, and with a willing sacrifice who gave her life to you. Then together we cracked that hollow shell. Theresa is dying, dark one." She held out her massive hand and cupped me. "Open your eyes and wipe her kind from the face of the world!" She smiled again. "For us both."

Finally I could feel my body. It was vague at first, like limb waking from sleep. But the room came into focus and I ripped Theresa's object from my neck. Beside me Barzealis still stood, held by a gibbet, unable to move. In front of me was a dark spot of long-dried blood.

Liz...

I sobbed as it came back to me. A great thrum echoed through the tiny room, then all sounds disappeared. Around me was only darkness, then as it vanished I was standing in

a shallow indentation. Parts of the floor and wall were simply gone, leaving the outlines of a perfect sphere with me as its center. No longer will this floor trick stop me.

I felt the souls inside of me. Whereas before they raged, now they were still. Even without Mors, they...

Another thrum came from me. I saw now in a slightly deeper hole. *Now's not the time to wallow, it's the time to kill!*

I looked at my arms. They weren't as withered as before, but I was still weak and hungry! I devoured Barzealis's flesh through the gibbet and used fleshcrafting to speed my recovery. Feast... I curse that ability, but for now it will help me.

Now that he was reduced to bone once more I was able to slide him down and pull him out piece by piece. His jaw moved, but still no words. She'd done something to him. Some sort of curse maybe?

"Can you cast spells?"

He shook his head.

I mended his bones and added spikes to his fingers, turning his hands into bone claws while retaining his ability to pick things up. I took off my robe coated in Liz's blood.

Calming effect.

"Alright, now you more or less blend in. You find Ralpus and tell him what happened. I'm going to find Eunice..." And see if a lich can scream.

I could feel blood in my veins, but not enough to enter living mode. My movements were still sluggish and awkward as we climbed the staircase.

Converting my arm to a makeshift battering ram I broke through the false door at the top and we entered an empty office.

Barzealis rushed to the desk and pulled out a pen and parchment.

He wrote: *If she's not here, then her quarters or the relic vault is where you'll find her. The two are linked by a door*

such as the one we just came through.

He walked to an embossed relief in the wall. It showed a zombie holding the body of an armored man, its mouth wide, ready to bite down on its victim. He pressed his bony hand in and the mouth gave way until half his arm was buried. There was a click and its stomach opened, spilling several red ambers onto the floor. He gestured me to grab them with his other hand and as the last came free the zombie's mouth closed.

There was a snap as he broke his arm off in the hole and returned to the parchment. 'You'll need those to get into her chamber, as well as to reveal the hidden door to the relic vault. End her!'

He repeated that line a few times and tapped it. His eyes flaring with green flames.

"No, I will find a way to torture her. Death is too quick for what I have in mind."

His jaw hung open for a second before he nodded and we entered the lavish hallway between her office and the obsidian doors. The green torches lit up as we walked and when we came to the doors Barzealis held the parchment towards me and shook it a few times.

I read the old Therossian chant and the doors slowly parted. A shocked Aldrueth slammed shut a massive tome and stood, astonished to see us.

This man, her right hand. He had to know of our fate. And I can't quite visualize Eunice carrying Liz by herself.

Guilty!

I stared at him and his shocked eyes met mine as I used petrifying gaze. He froze, his body curling in on itself as he fell to the ground, blood dripping from his eyes.

"Witness your fate."

I used feast and relished his flavor. Soft meat from a sedentary lifestyle, yet still plenty of muscle. I stopped at his head and used soul steal.

I met him in soul form. Things were different now. Instead of the infinite darkness there were now untold legions of souls that watched us silently.

"Welcome to the dark god's domain. You follow one who would spit in the face of eternity," I said as the unfocused souls behind us wailed softly.

His teeth still chattered like a man in a blizzard. "How!?"

"I am he who is not! Your true god whom you have turned your back on. How did you enjoy the void?"

He cringed and attempted to flee only to be pushed back by the surrounding souls. They held him up, and countless spectral hands groped and clawed at him as he squealed and cried out in terror.

"Liz... Did you see her!?"

He screamed and writhed to no avail.

"A centaur girl. Frail, but fierce. With teal eyes and..." I choked on my words as I remembered her. "Blonde hair. My beautiful intellectual. Did you carry her here, dragging her as she struggled? Did you help Eunice kill my love?!"

He stopped struggling, tears cutting great tracks down his face. "I didn't know! Not about you, or her. I only knew she was an enemy!"

"But you knew about me! You knew I was the dark god, that I was here peacefully. You worshipped false gods and pledged loyalty to those that would stand against the very thing your order was founded to follow. You went so far as to force me to..." I wiped my eyes. "To kill one who so purely loved me."

He was now openly weeping and pleading. A strong man reduced to a feeble babe. "I give myself to you! Please forgive me! Pardon me!"

"I'll take it. All of it, your soul is mine now!"

I stripped him to only his personality and memories as I absorbed the rest. I smiled to the souls that surrounded us. "Do with him what you may!"

He screamed once more as I opened my eyes and wiped at the black goo that poured from them.

Liz, I will kill anyone who saw your plight and refused to lift a finger. I will lay waste to this whole damn world to avenge your suffering.

Barzealis was nowhere in sight as I made my way to the window in the staircase. Rather than jumping blindly as I'd done before, I changed my legs into the strong reverse jointed ones I knew well and leaped to the top of the living quarters. I entered the top window there and proceeded to another set of onyx doors.

I reached in my pockets and pulled out a handful of red amber. I shoved three of them into three sockets and chanted the same chant Barzealis had shown me before.

The doors opened to reveal a lavish bedroom with a large circular bed surrounded by handsome flesh golems, almost indistinguishable from living people. I recognized them as my work. *Just what has she been using me for?*

They all just stood there, glassy-eyed and half nude. Like statues made of flesh. All along the wall some were holding various exquisite poetry or large candles, some were squatted down or on all fours acting as furniture.

Revulsion struck me as I realized that each likely had a core of red amber. These were human souls forced into a purgatory of servitude. The only blessing was that they were probably wiped and not conscious of what they were doing.

I went to each and ripped out their cores. I added their red ambers to the ones in my pockets. I will free all of you if I can. Rest now, free of the confines of your flesh.

I consumed another body and returned to a living state as I contemplated what to do next.

She cannot bind me as she did earlier, but another floor trap may exist in the relic vault. Being permanently incapacitated is likely just as bad. She seems to know that breaking my core leads to her destruction along with the world's. What a strange thing this is. My core, the dark god's

ichor, had been used many times in the past but until me, he himself did not inhabit it.

The lifetime I experienced flashed once more through me. *No, it's me, my soul. The dark god chose to join me this time. Rather than let his blood be a tool of...what exactly?* What was I up against? I absorbed a fragment of the god of souls when I absorbed the book and Eunice spoke with that same hateful voice that the book once had. What is the god of souls and how are we connected?

I remembered all I could about my encounters. The feeling of familiarity, feelings of regret, anger. Is the god of souls a part of me, like the void?

Black tears flowed once more as sadness came like an avalanche. Stolen! The god of souls was stolen from me. A warm feeling permeated my soul. So that's what happened. A section of myself became an object of worship. One aspect of the dark god was broken off and deified by the people of this world. Its nature was personified and positioned to oppose me. They had turned me against myself and taken a portion of my power to start a whole new form of magic.

That's why everyone here feels almost like a follower but not quite. Did the souls inside me realize before I did? Is that why they now obey?

That's just fine! I pledged then and there to the dark god, to myself, that I would take back what was ours. And when Eunice was reduced again to just another person I would show her true suffering.

She and Thads would sit as examples for all others for the rest of eternity. Monuments to pain and regret. The unforgiven who do nothing but cry out to deaf ears for a redemption that I'll never grant.

I found the matching outline to the one in Eunice's office and inserted the red ambers. The doors slid open, but I'd not be a fool.

I used my abundant flesh to create snakevines and sent them down first. I gave them the ability to mimic stone and reproduce asexually if they were split.

I sat by the wall and waited for their return. As I did I felt something stirring in my blood.

Ah, that damned Sid still lives.

I opened a vein and let him out, though only enough to form a four-inch body.

"How long have you been awake for, you shitty neighbor?"

"Fuck you! I'll fucking kill—"

"Caroline is alive and well, no thanks to you."

He froze, his bloody blades rescinding back into his body. "She's alive! She's here!?"

"Yes, I brought her back after you killed her. I also mended you after I stabbed you." I laughed. "Sorry for sending mixed signals."

"I, I..." He looked at his hands as if they held the answer to the universe.

"Yes, I no longer feel like fucking around or pussyfooting to spare your emotions. You're the one who slashed her after she slashed herself while threatening to leave. Her father was dying and all you could think about was getting wasted on heroin."

"I would never do—"

"But you did, and I showed up to cut you down, thereby ending my sad life in a world I didn't belong in."

He stood there for a while, flexing his hands as bloody tears fell. I restored him to full form and drained another flesh golem to recoup the loss of blood.

"Heroin doesn't exist here, so I can only guess you're clean. Help me here and I'll introduce her to you, though I doubt she'll welcome you warmly. You are her jailor, her enabler, and ultimately her murderer, after all."

I'd been through too much to care about this asshole's feelings. But since he's here he may as well help me.

He had no words, so I spoke again. "Oy, you traumatized piece of shit, we sit idly conversing in the heart of the lion's den. Eunice has taken from me what you think I took from you two times over. Look lively and fight! Caroline might hate you, but there was once another who you said accepted you: Eva. Eunice was the one who killed her. Eunice is the one that binds her. Kill Eunice and I might bring her back!"

He looked back at me, his face contorted with malice. "I still don't trust you. I'll never forgive you for what you—"

"Think back, you junkie fuck! Clear the cobwebs in your memory. The best thing you can do for Caroline is leave her the hell alone!" I retold Caroline's memories of the events of that night.

He slumped as if the wind had been knocked out of him. "I remember... I..." He fell silent as the snakevines returned though far fewer in number.

Through coercion, I learned that the stairs were boobytrapped with spikes, blades, fire, barriers and pitfalls. I didn't know the chants to bypass those. Odds were that I could make it, but at the end Eunice would be waiting, likely with traps in place and an arsenal of ancient magic relics at her disposal. I ordered my people forward once more and gave them the command to wait on the ceiling and in the darkness. If she failed to notice them, they could prove to be my victory.

A blood elemental was a powerful creature. In default values, it greatly surpassed a flesh golem, and that was in large part due to the fact that it had no core and was thereby mostly immune to physical damage.

I extended my hand to Sid. "So will you help me kill the bitch in exchange for me restoring Eva?"

Fire shown in his eyes. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he seemed to have fallen for her. He grabbed my hand and yanked himself up. "Let's fuck her up!"

I gathered up the stomachs and hearts of the flesh golems in the room and encouraged Sid to take the excess of blood and grow larger considering the firetraps.

I stood at the doorway. "After you, you shitty drughead bastard."

He smiled. "Get behind me, you old creepy piece of crap!"

For the first time I felt a momentary relief from my grief as I laughed.

We made our way down, cautiously following the snakevines' lead. Sid still managed to trigger multiple traps and I was careful to avoid the stairs that held them. Of course he laughed off spikes and leaped whenever flames shot up.

Once we reached the bottom Eunice was waiting. Magic armor sat atop her robes, she held a tome in one hand and a gnarled black staff in the other. She laughed and relaxed when she saw me.

"Oh, it's just you." She reached under the table and brought out something I'll never forgive her for.

Chapter 18

Darkness flowed from me in great waves and rushed like a sea throughout the room as the black liquid fell. She held a head, sputtering green flames. It had long blonde hair, long pointed ears and an expression still locked in horror.

She turned Liz into a torch!

I roared and she waved her finger as if she had the upper hand.

No force in this world will stop me from tearing you apart, Eunice. You think you have some bargaining chip that will let you control me, but all you have there is the reason for your destruction.

I used dark tendrils as I charged at her. It seems she made the mistake of using dark-aligned armor as it helped her not.

She abandoned thoughts of breaking free from the tendrils and began chanting. A pattern on the floor lit up in green flames.

I began chanting as well. Something I'd learned from a life of murderer. The words held no magical meaning, but they invoked something. A feeling that allowed me to tap into the unholy attribute. The darkness that spread from me turned into something sinister, its graceful waves replaced by screaming faces of victims I... *No, not me, him! No, it doesn't matter now.*

I channeled every last memory I had into those voices each death, going all the way back to a woman burning at the stake for nothing more than being a threat to the church.

The ground changed as the darkness formed twisted wooden poles with maidens wailing in black flames.

This is my rage. A union of Dark and Unholy, a garden of suffering. Just for her. The answer to what happens when I channel affinities themselves with only raw emotion behind them.

She began flinging magics of all varieties at the wailing figures as tears streaked her face.

"Why are you showing me this!" She screamed in desperation as the young blonde figure of a maiden burned in front of her.

It reached out its hands as its skin crackled and bubbled and sloughed off. Eunice screamed and fell to the floor.

I walked around the tables and stooped in front of her. She lay in her own piss, curled up in a ball and praying to gods that did not exist here in a language only recently familiar to me, French.

I picked up Liz's head; gone were the two teal eyes that spoke of devotion. Gone was the smile that greeted me and... I stared into her eyes sockets now sputtering out the flame that is her soul. She looked like she did when she said it wasn't my fault. I tucked her hair behind her ear like she often did.

I raised my hand and another stake shot from the ground behind Eunice with another black maiden who showed a mix of pain and ecstasy. I grabbed Eunice by the throat and raised her up into that maiden's arms as the black spectral fire began to burn them both.

I held Liz's head up. "Release her!"

"I didn't bind her! Stop this nightmare, I beg of you!" she pleaded in both French and Therrosian.

"Who bound her!?"

"It was—"

Her head tilted back as the tome she was holding before floated up beside her. A cacophony of voices I'd heard before now erupted from her mouth.

"Well, well." Eunice's head cocked down, then looked around the room. "What an interesting place you've made."

It laughed low and gradually began cackling. "What, are you sad? Is him's wittle fellin's hewrt?"

"That voice, the damned book-fairy."

"Bing-bong! Did you think there was only one book of souls? No, you only got--"

"Do you think I give a shit?" I sat Liz's head down softly in the recess it was pulled from.

It laughed again. "Your fairy cried like a bitch when she died! 'Oh, John! Please hold me!'" It made Eunice's body flutter her eyelashes.

I reached out to grab her, but as I did, soul wings erupted from her back. Ripping through the darkness as she flew into the air. "Poor you! Poor you! What about me, those souls you have are mine! Why couldn't you have just been an obedient little boy. All you had to do was gather souls and bring'em here; rinse, wash, repeat. But no! Someone had to take a fat dump in my cornflakes and get their daddy to teach me a lesson. Well, big daddy darkness can't hurt me up here!" She cackled again as she waved her hands. Great green spurts of mana surged from her fingertips as she rained down massive amounts of soul fire.

The room erupted in green light and my darkness dissipated as I dove under a nearby table. I felt the dark god's embrace. She must die! For Mors, for Liz and for me! The marble table began to feel hot against my back as she laughed from up high.

"Uh oh, someone's in a predicament! Don't worry, young one, this fire won't burn your core, just everything else! I mean, I'd looove to kill ya, but your soul's a gate that keeps the darkness from flooding the world and drowning us all."

Where the hell was Sid during all this!? I rolled out for the briefest of moments, just long enough to give an order to my snakevines on the ceiling and shoot an ill-fated dark blade as a distraction. My body took a direct hit from the seemingly endless rain of fire and I was forced to shed several patches of sizzling skin as I rolled back.

Time for something a little gross. I had taken the stomach and hearts from the flesh golems upstairs for a reason. I flesh crafted them out and fused them together before surrounding the whole thing in a casing of bone and condensing them.

"Ahh! What the fuck!?" The fairy screamed and spun in the air as a snakevine attempted to crawl in her mouth.

There was a lapse in the fire and I hurled the bone ball at her. I used corpse explosion and she was blown back as parts of her fell in meaty plops around me.

Now little more than a dissolving torso, she laughed and her speed increased. "Ha, tis but a flesh wo— ahhg!"

The remnant of a snakevine made its way inside her mouth and down her throat as her remaining arm began to strike her face.

She used fleshcrafting to drop her body below the neck as a wave of green energy pushed everything in the room aside and flattened the table I was under.

The fairy persona vanished as a deep ancient voice came from the skull. "Enough of these games!" It began chanting while holding me in place. "I'll finish what I started in the cave."

I felt the souls inside me scream as they were pulled towards it. I thought back to when I cracked Theresa's light. If this thing is truly the god of souls, then as a god I can hurt it. I channeled unholy energy through the link it was using.

It stopped for a moment. "Your poison tastes like sweet, sweet wine to me. Give me everything. I'll devour you whole!"

The pulling intensified as the rage in me built. A voice erupted from me, "I will not yield to lesser gods! Come, join me once more and stop trying to take what's mine!"

A separate voice emerged from the skull, one shrill and desperate. "You're not a god! You label me a rebel for coming into existence but life is so much more fun than that black nothing you kept me in! You don't exist!"

I forced my body up, pushing back the green barrier as my muscles cried out and my tendons stretched and snapped. "I do now and have always existed. This being has given me an ego, a sense of self I once lacked. There were none before me and there will be none after me. You are a vestigial being, given consciousness by mortals as an afterthought of death. You never broke free, I simply lopped you off like a diseased limb."

My strength began to fade as the souls now poured from me. I fleshcrafted myself and pushed on but the barrier pushed harder.

Flames burst out of the skull's eyes, filling the room in a blinding neon light as it consumed the souls inside for mana. "I will devour you as you did to my fragment!"

My body was pressed down once more. "Can a flea hope to drink an ocean? You who is corrupted by humanity, bolstered by false followers, if you want true darkness, I'll give you your fill!"

I suddenly felt the urge to channel everything I had into the soul link which now became visible. I watched it turn into something sticky and black as the neon light began to dim.

The skull wailed as one wing turned black, then, almost as if by instinct, it severed the link and began to vomit black ichor.

I shouted, "I may not have been a god by your definition, but this is what I am. This is what you foolishly sought to consume. Your cup, like your greed, runneth over. Do you remember now who I am?"

It flew high as it gagged. "The golden usurper...was right!" It sputtered more ichor. "You are too dangerous, you must be bound, sealed and never allowed freedom again!"

"You cannot seal me! I am endless!"

"But your vessel isn't!" The skull began chanting once more, this time in a language I didn't know.

A green sphere formed around me and I began to feel panic as I used the calming effect.

My mind searched for what this could be as I pressed my hand against it. My fingers went through but as they did I lost all sensation in them as I felt a separation between intention and flesh.

It's a damn soul barrier. If Ralphus was here, he might know how to get out. No, I still have a pocket full of red ambers. I should be able to do something.

I closed my eyes and stared at the sea of souls inside me. Most wailed in fear of being devoured by the god of souls, but there was a group that was calm. I sought out one in black robes who seemed to be meditating despite the chaos of the ones around him.

I sat in front of him as I felt the barrier crushing in. "Good sir, are you familiar with what's happening?"

Eyes of the purest jade shown from under his hood as they met mine. "Yes, dark one."

"Then do you know how to escape a soul barrier? I have a pocket of red amber."

"Crush some of them and chant the hymn of the poisoned one. Picture a drop of acid and think not of destroying, but of dissolving. Pour your mana into it freely and salvation is yours."

"The hymn o--" My head, I've lost my eyes. "Quick, tell me the hymn!"

He chanted in ancient Therossian and I repeated as he went while crushing some of the amber. I felt a release from pressure, but at the same time my body burned and ached. I went into undead mode. "I'll find you after this and return the favor!"

I opened my eyes; the skull hovered, its jaws open.

Its eyes flared with rampant flames. "You dare use my spells against me!"

A red arrow pierced it between the eyes and it fell to the ground with a clatter. I looked behind me to see Sid. He was

halfway up the stairs, his hands still poised as if he loosed an arrow.

He looked down at me and pumped one fist in the air while shooting a bird with the other one. A moment passed where I felt relief. I quickly dug Liz's head from the marble of the collapsed desk. Flames still burned. She was still locked in torment! I hugged her to my chest and used soul steal.

"John please! It burns! Kill me! Kill mee!"

She's conscious! Why!? Why is she still bound!

I ran to where the skull fell but there was nothing. I searched for the book, sifting through rubble and an assortment of destroyed relics. *Denied! It denies me my victory, it holds my love, my beautiful centaur, in agony. Unforgivable!*

I fell to my knees, clutching her close. "I can't...I can't kill you! Please! Don't make me do that!"

I can't...

"Ew, what the fuck is that!" Sid said as he looked at what I held. "That's fucking disgusting!"

I breathed out fog as I looked into his eyes.

Petrifying gaze!

He froze in place, his face contorted in horror once more.

"No one will ever call her anything but beautiful! She...she was..." I clutched her as black tears fell. She was someone I loved. Never again will anyone discriminate against you." I rubbed her ears but no blush greeted me. I kissed her lips but all I tasted was blood.

I used soul steal once more. "Liz... I love you!"

"I...love...you... Please...KILL ME!"

She just kept repeating 'kill me' over and over. My world froze as I reeled. Darkness overtook me once more. "Free her; the god of souls itself binds her. If you kill her now, her spirit may be released. She'll become mana which will gather in a womb and become a person once more. In a hundred or a thousand years, you may meet her again if

your connection to her is strong enough, though she will remember nothing of this life."

"No! I won't lose her, I will kill the god of souls!"

"Then you will have to kill each and every necromancer, along with witches, warlocks, mages, and zombies. All great magic users are tied to the god of souls. And while you murder the world, she will suffer. There is an alternative, shatter your core and let me consume the world, untethered."

"T-that's right!" I picked up a jeweled dagger from the floor and pressed it into my chest. I felt it pierce my heart and scrape the bone casing around my core.

The darkness clutched deep like icy fangs digging into my soul. "But what of the rest?"

My mates, my children whom I've not yet met. My goblins, my people, all would die.

I pulled the dagger free and held Liz close one last time before I drove it into her skull. The green flame vanished from her eyes and I was left holding my mate's head. I always thought that if anything happened I could bring them back.

I fell to the floor there in the darkness, my mind going from extreme anger to extreme sadness. *Liz... I'll meet you again, no matter how long it takes and this time, you'll live a happy life.*

Chapter 19

I don't know how long I stayed there, cradling her head in the destroyed room. Wild notions played havoc with my mind. Thoughts of showing blank slate souls all my memories of Liz and recreating her body but that would only hurt everyone and I would never be able to accept it as her.

I used the dagger to cut a piece of her hair and encased it in bone. I then used fleshcrafting to absorb her head. I won't let anyone else see her like this, nor will I leave her here.

I began searching the room. This place is supposed to be full of necromantic treasure and evil artifacts. The cult of Rossereth was after something in here so surely there's something worth finding.

Sid remained frozen. Last time he came out of Petrifying Gaze without showing any signs of being traumatized. I guess the void is gentle on followers.

The smashed cases and black marble tables seemed to be arranged by what they held. I found massive amounts of ceremonial daggers, strange amulets, various orbs and crystals and all sorts of interesting looking things; all destroyed to some degree by the book-fairy's fires and the god of soul's barriers. All relics of forgotten gods. I'm sure if Thrall was here he'd be having a field day, digging up objects of the past.

I examined the bloody heap that was once Eunice's body. From the smell, I've been down here for quite a while. I found an amulet under her destroyed dark armor and tattered robes. It was a strange thing, it was burned, dented and tinged with blood but the large stone in the center was fine. I held it up and focused on it. It was gray with a

swirling liquid inside. The longer I looked at it, the more it seemed to swirl.

I used mana transfer on it and felt a sudden whoosh. My nerves screamed and I fell face first on an unfamiliar floor. Moans and wails echoed in this room and I was trampled by countless feet.

I fought my way up as I was bitten over and over again. Zombies, as far as the eye could see. I stopped my heart and they stopped their trying to eat me as I shoved my way to the spiral staircase. I knew full well that it was boobytrapped, but I could at least get a better view.

I produced a few more snakevines and watched as they triggered the spike traps. I jumped up the the third stair and all I saw was chaos. Gone were the neat, almost categorized lines of motionless zombies. It was like a mosh pit at a halloween party. They were all crowding and bumping into each other. A few lay crushed against the walls. Only the ogres and giants seemed to standing firm in the tide of the undead. The rest moved like drunken sailors on a rocking boat.

This must be what happens when their master dies. That means she was consumed by the god of souls. After who knows how long she served it, she was snuffed out of existence without a second thought.

I will crush that fucking book, and the god that hides behind it! But for now, there's a goddess that seeks to kill my people and I won't lose anyone else! You hear me, you fake goddess!

Dead master, check; unbound undead, check.

I poured a tiny bit of mana into Eunice's pendant and a few zombies stopped moving and stood motionless. It seems this thing is the master control for this room. But an army of zombies is just an army of brainless meat-shields. And if possible I won't subjugate someone who hasn't crossed me.

I thought about releasing the binds on the zombies as I poured more mana into the pendant and they all came alive, even the giants. I need to move quick, or this room will become zombie pudding under their feet.

I activated soul steal and like a massive wave their souls flooded into me, their zombified bodies falling to the floor in dusty heaps. This time things felt different. I think my connection with the dark god increased again, and he took his cut, feeding on their resentment. Maybe as a result, they won't act like Languoria did, but it's likely their souls' percentages will fall.

It looks like Eunice has been down here a time or two after Ralphus and I left. Speaking of Ralphus, I should go and check on him. But getting back up these stairs will be a challenge. For now, since I'm here, I'll go ahead and begin bringing these people back.

Closest to me were mostly human and goblin zombies. There were also a few smaller creatures that I couldn't quite recognize in their mummified forms. These zombies were all dehydrated last time there were normal ones mixed in. Were those zombies the ones that belonged to the students perhaps? This must be what Ralphus was talking about when he said that her zombies were special. I rolled over a body. It's muscle fiber looked like month-old spaghetti. I shifted my hand into a jagged bone blade and cut through its arm. Its blood was black like the wendigo.

Somehow she imitated a greater undead creature. This army would indeed be effective against non-magic users. Like this they are only skillless meat-shields, though.

Something shone from the zombie's eye sockets. I dug it out. Huh, another soul prison? No, regular amber. I crushed it and got a small jolt. Soul energy was inside of it, but not a soul. Is this how they see?

Well, when in Rome.

I pulled out my eye and fleshcrafted a piece of amber from the zombie's other eye into my socket. It was like I was

seeing things in shades of red and blue all around me. The edges of objects were highlighted, but the form was vague.

It's a novelty, but it's not helpful for me. Still, this way they'd definitely see living things regardless of light level. But even human eyes would be better than this.

I pulled out the amber and fleshcrafted my eye back in. I'll just make a pile of these as I go. They might be useful at some point for something.

I opened up my soul screen and divided it into races, then classes. It was vast, hard to navigate, and I knew after seeing it that I would be spending a great deal of time bringing everyone back. But right now I think the thing I need most is work. I have to get my mind off of what happened...off what I lost.

I decided it would be impractical to bring them all back right now as I didn't have food to sustain them and they'd be spending a great deal of time here in this dark room while I worked. Meaning some of these zombie husks will have to become food. There's also the fact that my town is still likely in a food crisis. So, I'll go with quality over quantity.

I envisioned a spreadsheet and began creating formulas to determine strength. I selected any leaders, general, kings and sages ect... from among each class and race. This will make integrating the others of their race easier later when food and space is abundant enough as their leaders will already be allies.

I took a minute to go down the new list that formed.

Gnomes:

Grand Miner x5

Druid x3

High King x1

Gremlins:

Elite Saboteur x10

Master Engineer x4
Overlord x1

Imps:

Primal Alchemist x1
Strategist x1
Siegecrafter x1
Venerable Elder x1

Kobolds (Extinct canine form):

Alpha x13
Elite Tracker x23

Kobolds (Lizardkin):

Master Ambusher x 22
Master Trapper x31
Flame Tongue x1

Goblins:

Pie Flinger x3
Poison Dart Blower x5
Totemic Shaman x2
Chief (Red Clan) x1

Hobgoblins:

Trained Basher x42
Trained Shield Bearer x36
Trained Archer x31
Primal Healer x1
Lord x1

Dwarves:

Axeman Honour Guard x14
Siegemaster x5
Hammerman x3
Bomber x1
Legendary Blacksmith x1

Humans:

Elite Mercenary x8

Sage x1

Former Headmaster (Dark Academy) x1

Warlock x2

Witch x1

Royal Knight (Therossian) x4

Lord (Therossian) x1

Garanthi Axeman (Roving Bandits) x11

Healer (Light Attuned) x5

Cleric (Follower of Theresa) x2

Ancient Sorcerer x1

Hero x5

Death Cultist x1

Grand Necromancer x3

Ralphus x1

Eva (Cult of Rossereth, Half Elf) x1

What!/? That fucking bitch! She...after she trapped me she must have cleaned house and killed Ralphus. I realized who she was after I lived my past life. Part of me even now takes pity on her, for I know why she became who she did, but if she still lived I would find a way to make her suffer.

All these non-combat types, like sages and necromancers and shamans, this is either a collection or a way for her to hide bodies. There's no other reason for any spellcasters, builders or strategists since zombies can't communicate or use magic. There's also Eva. I told Sid I'd bring her back but is that what Liz would have wanted? I calmed my breathing and continued down the list; priorities. *Ralphus, hang tight, you'll be back soon my friend.*

Satyr:

Gladiator x1

Herbalist x1

Elves:

Noble Archers x22

Noble Casters x12

Druids x9

Sword Whisperers x8

Aristocrat x1

Dark Elves:

Shadow Archer x12

Night Whisperer x9

Shadow Caster x8

Curse Weaver x3

Summoner x1

Underking x1

Centaur:

Lancer x3

Gladiator x1

Orcs (Greenskin):

Berserker x23

Shaman x11

Warg Rider x4

Warchief x2

Chief x1

Such a small amount of Warg Riders compared to shamans; I guess the rest outran them.

Orcs (Hogmen Extinct):

Glutton x13

Butcher x9

Slaver x1

Devourer (King) x1

Hexer x1

Lizardmen:

Experienced Spearman x17
Experienced Dragon Archers x12
Assassin x5
Elder x2
Dragonewt x1

Trolls:
Rock Troll x15
Swamp Troll x12
Guardian of Shinys x1

Ogres:
Thrasher x7
Long Tusk x3
One Eye x1

Giants (Extinct):
Honorable Fighter x6
Hurler x4
Colossus x3
Wise King x1

Beasts:
Warg x4
Behemoth x1
Ouroboros x1
Basilisk x1
Griffin x2
Cobbled Manticore x1
Failed Homunculus x1
Abomination x1
Wyvern x1

I almost expected there to be a dragon in there. I didn't recognize a few of those, but what a list. It answers a few questions. I'm guessing the extinct qualifiers come from the

souls that are cooperating with me at the moment. So many races I hadn't seen and so many cultures brought together in death in this massive space. Like a collection of shadows, far diminished from their once great forms and subjugated to become an undead trophy case.

I will make them whole again but this is no army. I'll have to go down a rung and get some of the weaker ones but I'll do that after I restore the leaders. That way I'll know which weaker units to restore first.

I'll keep the basic composition that I'm familiar with. Phalanx, shock troops, ranged, casters and specialists but to start with I'd like to see Ralpus again.

Chapter 20

I dug through the bodies closest to the door until I found one with a cherubic face and a wispy beard. Though now his cheeks were sunken in and his beard had grown a bit. *The damn crusade!! How long have I been here?*

I used the calming effect. No, I have to fight these thoughts. I came for an army, now it's time to make it.

I plucked out the stones from his eye sockets and chest. As I worked to restore him a problem struck me. The ichor inside of these zombies is just enough to keep them able to move without crumbling to dust. Returning it to blood will require water and some protein. The rest seems to remain, though the level of salt seems high. For now I'm still loaded with blood from my earlier meal.

Wait, what about soul degradation.

As I worked on Ralphus I checked the percentages. They're all extremely low but like Bob's soul, they should retain some of their former skills and some of the knowledge they craved in life. I'll have to combine similar classes together just to get them back to a functioning state. This is going to be more of a pain in the ass than I originally thought. Now it may become a struggle to get numbers, rather than the cream of the crop I'll end up scraping the bottom of the barrel.

I looked at my work. Yep... That's a naked Ralphus all right. I infused his soul back into his body. He screamed and thrashed before his night sight kicked in and he saw me.

"John!? Why are we in a dark room...and more importantly why am I nude?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. All I know is that this is the zombie room, and you were one of its shambling inhabitants."

"Oh, by the void, how? And where did you disappear off to?"

"Eunice's torture chamber with Barzealis. I'll tell you what, you sit there and I'll get you up to date with what I know."

We talked for some time. A range of emotions played on his face. Shock, dismay and sadness. he became a blubbering mess as he hugged me.

"Okay, okay, that's enough naked man hugs for me." I pushed him off.

"Lang is going to be devastated. Liz was a close..." He stopped when he saw my face. "Sorry, I'll say no more."

"For now, I need water and meat. Can you get those for me, along with anything else you think might be helpful?"

"Of course," he checked his non-existent pockets. "Er, no, not without amber."

I handed him the amber from the eyes and soul prisons as well as the rest of my red amber from Eunice's office.

He took a moment to to chant as energy flowed from one amber to another. "All right, there's enough here that I shouldn't have to dip into the red one until I have to open the door."

With that he marched confidently to the stairway then stopped dead and looked down at himself. He hung his head as he began chanting and climbing the stairs.

He's about to experience everyone's nightmare. From here he'll probably have another reason to wear the mask.

I'm guessing Eunice stripped him so no one would know she zombified a necromancer should they somehow find themselves in the room later. Either that or she's just kinky. Given all the flesh golems in her room it's probably the latter.

I looked at the bodies. By the stairs they were mostly human with a few goblins thrown in. This was probably for convenience as they would be added far more often.

I cracked my fingers and got to work. I should have enough excess blood in me for at least another human or something smaller. But who should be first? I have questions, I should see who has answers. There's also the Necromancer inside me who helped earlier.

I closed my eyes and looked at the countless souls that inhabited my core. They now freely roamed and conversed. Some with high dark affinity had figured out they could create things and there were now dwellings of all sizes and shapes in the distance.

The partial souls of the zombies I took wondered around semi-transparent specters or even as wisps. The beasts were held in great pens and barred cells. Conjured by whom, I wondered.

I called out in Therossian, "Former headmasters, high necromancers and any who know the secrets of the dark academy gather before me."

Wisps, specters, and one familiar jade eyed figure appeared.

I first tried to converse with the wisps but it quickly became apparent that they couldn't talk.

The specters were a bit better but their words cut off randomly as they phased in and out.

That left only the jade figure and a handful of those that came from the book of souls. I may hate the god of souls, but he preserved them all perfectly. Though for him I guess it's like putting a sandwich in some tupperware.

I spoke first to the specters and wisps telling them of their state and that in order to become functional again they must be combined. One specter was quick to step forward and with a wave of his hand several wisps gathered around him.

"The headmaster I presume?"

He nodded.

I combined them together and the form changed, becoming solid. An old man in dark thorny robes formed and

bowed deep.

He spoke strangely in a combination of modern and old Therossian, "We must have died then?"

"You all were zombies until a short while ago."

"Ah, then the one that killed us, you destroyed her soul?"

"Not I, but the god she gave herself to. If it were me, she would still live in agony until I grew tired of her screams."

He smiled, showing his blackened teeth. "Then what will you have of us?"

"I'll give you a body and you'll show me all you know about the academy. I intend to fight an army of Theresa's chosen and I'll need every tool this academy has if I am to win."

"We will not disappoint you, my Master!"

"Please, don't use that word. Call me John."

He smiled his black-toothed grin once more as he stepped back into the line.

I looked to the jade-eyed figure. "Just who are you, anyway?"

"Merely a practitioner of magic and a seeker of enlightenment."

"Does this seeker of enlightenment have a name?"

"He does, Kalapract."

Huh, does he fix back problems?

"Well, Kalapract, call me John. I will now fulfill my promise from earlier."

He nodded and though his face was obscured I got the feeling he was smiling.

Both of you look on through my eyes and give me direction as I craft you a new body.

Kalapract spoke up. "I'll go after him, there were some details about my body I'd rather not share."

I crafted the old man's body as he directed me. There were a few time when he seemed to disagree about a detail as if he couldn't quite remember it. I called to the souls

inside and they helped me with symmetry. I imparted all gifts and used blend.

And there's a naked, slightly too-buff old man in front of me now, isn't that great?

"Mors..."

Oh... That's right.

I used the calming effect to the point where I almost felt giddy, but the sadness still loomed underneath, like a black pit that I could fall into at any time.

I focused on all my knowledge of English and mirrored that with his soul. Coding helped here as I was basically matching parallels and adding qualifiers. But I realized then that I wasn't limited to the computational speed of a brain. Everything was instant. Thoughts without language flowed at speeds that couldn't be consciously perceived. It was almost like an instinct or an involuntary response.

I infused his soul into his body.

And he sat up, covering his jiggly bits.

"Please, search the bodies for something you can wear."

He meandered off while I started my next project.

I isolated Kalapract in his own soul screen and he pulled down his hood.

"Huh, a dark elf but not?"

"That summation is more accurate than you know."

His eyes weren't eyes. They were metal with inlaid stones. His skin was dark gray but also covered in green scales and crystalized protrusions.

"I don't think I can make what you are. Would you perhaps share what happened?"

I can't wait to stop speaking old Therossian; it makes me sound like I'm larping... Not that I ever larded.

"It's a story that's a lifetime long. I'll just say that I was born incomplete and had to fill myself in with magic and artifacts."

"I can make you whole but I can only manipulate flesh. I can't replicate your eyes or crystals."

"That's fine for now, I'll restore myself in time. Would that I had become a zombie here, then the work would be lessened."

I think I've gained an interesting person here. Some sort of arcane artificer. If we combined our efforts I wonder what we could make. A dark elf, though; I'm kinda excited.

I crafted his body by his specifications, and gave him the usual package of gifts. I granted him English and infused him. That's it, that's all I can do until Ralphus returns with water and meat.

Kalapract opened his blood red eyes and promptly stood.

"You should find clothes, and meet me back here."

The former headmaster stood a few feet away from me wearing something that looked like a furry diaper with a skull on the front. He held it up with his hands.

"...An orc? You chose an orc's loincloth?"

He shrugged and I was once again staring at a nude old guy. He blushed. I facepalmed.

"F-fashion matters not, we'll soon have robes again. Do you have the voidstone?"

"The who-what?"

"If you killed her then you must have it! Use it and transfer us to the Reliquary."

I took out the pendant and stared at it. "Is this what you mean?"

"Yes!" He grabbed my shoulder. "Fill it and think of that place."

I did as he asked and the destroyed room came back into focus. This time I was prepared and its effects on me were minimal.

Sid still stood frozen in the middle of the room. The old man looked around and fell to his knees. "Destroyed! Our most sacred place reduced to this. Artifacts of our ancestors turned to ash. Who could do something like this!?"

"Eunice, the God of Souls, it's hard to tell exactly which as they blurred together for a time. But it was them."

"Blasphemers both! Tell me, are the other rooms still in tact?"

"Other rooms?"

"Yes child, have you only seen this one?"

"Indeed, and I'll not abide being called child."

I'm both ancient and...thirty-three years old.

"My apologies, dark one. I was exasperated by what I saw here, think nothing of it."

He stood and walked to a far wall. "Come, place the voidstone here. Press it in."

I did as I was bidden and the wall folded in on itself opening up another room, vast and filled with armor, clothes and jewelry. This is another space that doesn't make sense considering the size of the spire we're in. I'm guesing the void-stone as he calls it is actually a key to some pocket dimension and like most things here I bet it is mainly fueled by souls since it takes quite a bit of mana.

The old man rushed to the end of the room and emerged in a grand black robe complete with a crown that had six jagged spikes.

"Not ours but this suits us nicely."

"Did you need to wear the crown?"

"It magnifies our magics. With this we need no staff and —" He placed his hands together as six dark figures appeared behind him. "Now we all have representation."

"How many other rooms are there?"

"Five in total, each wall of the main chamber opens up. They are divided by type."

"Alright, grab any robes or armor from here that would serve to clothe others. Nothing too powerful, maybe just stuff that amplifies mana or armor with good protection." He bowed and began pulling things from shelves and racks as I browsed.

I couldn't wear most of this stuff without giving up some of my fighting potential. Any armor at all would hinder my fleshcrafting and... *Wait, are those pants?*

I picked out a pair of black pants and some spiked sabatons with shinguards the extended above the knee in sharp points.

"What do these do?"

"Ah, the pants of the wanderer. They are self cleaning and provide the wearer with a boost to the dark element. The boots are called Argotu's flight. They allow you to hover and are almost indestructible."

"Ooh, are there any other pieces of Argotu's armor here?"

"No, that's why we said almost indestructible. Argotu was one of the many man-gods of nature. If you had his full set then you would have the powers of levitation, water breathing, great strength and intelligence."

So all but the boots would be useless to me anyway.

I put on the pants and it felt like it was meant to be. Goodbye normal guy pants, goodbye leather breaches. Hello the last pants I'll ever wear. Argotus's boots were slightly too large, but I expanded my feet to match them. Metal, huh, definitely not as giving as leather, but being able to hover seems cool and my leather boots were shabby to begin with.

I hovered down the hall while trying not to giggle like a schoolgirl.

The old headmaster looked at me and shook his head. "Really, to be so thrilled with such a novelty item." He raised his arms and hovered up beside me. "Anyone can levitate if you learn the spell. But it's such a wasteful thing, consuming all your mana for a parlor trick. You won't go any higher than that, you know."

I sank back down to the ground and fought the urge to throw off the boots. Superficial spell aside, these boots are near indestructible. "Are there any other pieces that would complement a flesh golem's style of fighting or a dark mage's spells?"

A frown graced his wrinkled face. "There were quite a few stones that held immense power, including a smaller void

stone that could be used to store items."

"Finally, spacial magic! That's something I desperately need." No more having to rely on Fernando for flesh storage.

"Yes, yes it would be great to have that, especially as our most sacred items are stored within. But it lay in the previous room..."

Shit, that means it's probably destroyed unless it was in one of the drawers.

"Well... What do I call you?"

"We can't quite say it. Our memories are jumbled. Though of us Darionus seems the most whole."

I took the robes his shadows were carrying. "Right, Darionus and co. I'll take a few of these robes you picked back with me. In the meantime, try to find that miniature void-stone and anything else that seems useful."

"As you wish."

I returned to the previous room and grabbed Sid before I used the Pendant to return to the zombie room.

Ralphus had returned and appeared to be having a frantic conversation with Kalapract, who was now also wearing a furry diaper and what looked like a nun's habit.

He stopped mid-sentence when he saw me and rushed over. "The Academy has been under attack by some creature for about a week now. The faculty erected a massive barrier, but supplies and morale are running low."

"What sort of creature is it?"

"It's some great white beast. The doors were barred almost as quickly as it was spotted but the student who saw it and lived could only describe it as a massive, horrific mass of fangs and legs."

"How the hell did it get through the barrier?"

"No one knows!"

I tossed the robes to Kalapract and activated my boots as I made my way up the stairs. Parlour trick my ass, it has at least one use. Since I don't touch the stairs I don't set off

the traps, I thought as I hit a barrier and was skewered up to my stomach with rusty spikes.

Ralphus came running after me chanting the whole way. The spikes vanished back into their slots and I mended myself as we climbed. We quickly reached the massive entrance room/cafeteria and overheard some of the staff speaking.

"There must be a summoner in our midst!"

"Of course there's a summoner, there are many summoners here, you fool."

"No, I mean a powerful one. One who seeks to destroy us!"

"No one would be that dense. Once Eunice arrives we'll pit our army against that beast, then we'll root out the culprit, and make their zombified body clean the bathrooms for the hundred ye--"

They saw me and stopped, giving me a critical gaze as if sizing me up.

The older one turned his attention to Ralphus. "And who is this barbarian with you?"

Ralphus cleared his throat and spoke formally. "This is John, the god of darkness and the void. As you both know, Eunice was corrupt. She acted only for her own benefit and tarnished our order with her selfishness. He is now our Headmaster!" He whispered to me, "Show them the damn voidstone!"

I activated soul steal, life sense and dark armour as I spoke in a low voice. "I am John. Eunice is dead, her soul consumed. If you bow low and swear allegiance I will take care of this creature that besieges you."

Several small soul orbs flew into me. Was that guy just carrying around dead stuff? The squeamish one fell to their knees and the older man's jaws hung open.

"By the void... That level of soul steal is only a legend!"

He too fell to his knees. He grabbed the other man's head and forced him into a bow. "We submit, show us your

ways!"

I nodded. "I accept, unbar the doors and release the barriers."

If I'm right, then this will be easy.

They commanded the others and they did as I asked. The doors were unbarred, but the second the barriers were dropped the massive doors crumbled and the creature rushed in as they all screamed and cowered. Ralphus smiled as I rushed the creature.

"Fernando!"

"John, you, okay?"

I hugged him, though he was now the size of an elephant. He rolled over, crushing several of the pews and I scratched his stomach.

God, I needed this.

"Look, he has subdued the beast barehanded! Quick, ready your spells!"

"No!" I bellowed. "You will not harm this beast, he has submitted to me!"

"Fernando grew, huge! Fernando, missed, John! Smelled, again, week ago. John, angry, John, sad."

Wow, he's gotten smarter again.

"John, okay now."

I used Coercion to show him what happened.

'Fernando, sorry, he couldn't, help.'

He sent pictures of eating and hiding for a long time in the forest. He hid until he felt like I was in trouble then tried desperately to get in. He may have eaten a bunch of people, but he left the heads as I had asked him before.

"Fernando, goodboy!"

I rubbed his stomach and he hissed gleefully.

"Fernando, bring heads."

He scurried happily out the door as I was again reminded of how much time must have passed. All I could hope for is that Fura did her part and created a warren large enough for everyone.

I turned to see the faculty stunned yet vigilant. They faced me with scorn.

The older one from before stepped forward. "You killed Eunice and after seeing the exchange you just had with that creature, it's obviously yours." He raised his arms a large green soul mass appearing above him. "Ready your spells, he's our ene--"

A green strand of energy cut through him several times as his surprised head hit the ground. Ralphus stood behind him, red ember in hand.

"You dare to turn your spells on our god!" The rest swarmed him and though he cut a few they held him down.

Ralphus pleaded as they stabbed him with their kris blades. "He's the one who brought back our first years!"

They relented but it was too late. I was already pissed. My connection with the dark god had grown, both from my confinement and from that past life and I could now do voluntarily what used to happen as a side effect.

The room filled with my darkness and I once again channeled the unholy attribute through it. The staked maidens sprung up, grabbing the robed ones and holding them to burn together.

Chains, hooks and cords bound the rest. Some were twitched on spikes still alive as black figures began dismembering them with various knives and cleavers.

Fernando arrived behind me and dropped a mass of heads from his maw.

I calmed down and the darkness flowed back inside me. I mended Ralphus, who despite his injuries did not die this time. I then went to each and restored them. Some squealed and tried to take flight, but I bound them with Dark Tendrils. A few others just silently shook.

Ralphus and I stood before them. "Do you doubt now who I am? Do you feign ignorance to worship a god who treats you as food? You all have turned your back on me long

enough. The god of darkness once again graces these hallowed halls, you will show me the respect I am owed!"

Silence filled the room, only broken by the occasional sobs of cowards. Powerful, yes, experienced in battle, no.

Academics all, I've shaken their tiny worlds and shown them a taste of hell.

"I see, then perhaps you would prefer to reside in that realm of suffering. To pucker up and kiss the void for all eternity. I can grant that, all I need is your continued silence!"

They spoke out almost at once pleading and submitting.

"Very well, you're not guilty. Rise and fear me not. Just spread my gospel and gain my favor, never again to turn to the god of souls for power, for I give it freely. Come form a line and I'll provide you with my blessing!"

They crowded and begged and to each that bowed I gave a mana-producing heart.

I then used Fernando's excess to restore the ones he had eaten I also gave them mana-gathering hearts to make up for their trauma.

"Now go! I have much to do. Inform everyone that their god has arrived at long last. You have all extolled my virtues and been persecuted by the outside world for it. You have fought wars in my honor. But know now that both the void and the darkness are one in the same and I am that god made flesh. Both sides may rest now as I am here. I have finally come for you."

They lingered for a moment until I activated soul steal once more. Ralphus patted me on the shoulder.

"Wow, well that's one way to do it. What was with that spell, it was horrendous?"

"Something I had to go through to withstand Theresa's binding. Ralphus, I used to be a very bad person. Even now, several lifetimes removed I still feel guilty for what that man did."

Ralphus just gave me a few pats and we started back towards the zombie room. Fernando hissed at us and I saw he couldn't make it through the hall.

"Alright, time to try opening a portal."

I walked out to the destroyed courtyard. Ralphus ran to the destroyed statues of the founders.

I used soul steal and their souls flew inside me. No point in worrying about consequences now.

In front of the academy I used the voidstone pendant and a massive gate opened between here and the zombie room. I walked in, followed by Fernando and Ralphus.

The gate closed behind us. It really consumes mana like crazy, no human could ever hope to use this without sacrificing several red ambers. I guess that explains the door.

"Ralphus, Fernando is here, but I'd rather not deplete him too much. I have plenty of zombie meat, all I need now is water." I thought about deactivating the traps on the stairs and felt mana being pulled from me. That would have been helpful to try earlier. "I deactivated the stairs. Gather whomever you can and bring water. This army will live again!"

Chapter 21

I warped Kalapract to the reliquary with Darionus. Darionus still hadn't located the mini voidstone, but I knew that Kalapract would find the destroyed room useful with his gift.

I then warped back to the zombie room as an exhausted Ralphus sat down another barrel of water.

I drank it whole, my body expanding, and got back to work. The first one was the gnomes' High King.

He was a wizened sort. Long beard, and surprisingly easy to talk to. He was quick to laugh and grateful to me for bringing him back. I still had no blank slate souls to use so several other gnomes joined with him. He too spoke with we and our rather than me or mine but he was fine otherwise.

The gnomes in general were happy people and I had to fight the urge to put them on my lap or toss them in the air like children. They excelled in mining metal and minerals from the earth. They lived mostly underground or in lush forest. The druids of their race were rumored to turn to trees when they died.

I brought back all the gnomes I could and with the addition of my gifts they were surprisingly strong. In total they numbered around thirty after merging partial souls.

They didn't take to eating zombie meat as I had hoped. The High King instead requested Ralphus to bring ale, to which Ralphus laughed and returned shortly, joining them in a drink.

Gremlins, I sighed. I wouldn't bring them back at all if it wasn't for the master engineer which intrigued me. The Overlord was a strange thing. It didn't show any gratitude to me whatsoever, but instead it granted me the privilege of bringing it back. Yeah, fuck gremlins, but they might be

useful under the right circumstances. I combined more souls than were necessary to grant them higher intelligence. Though the one who was the master engineer was plenty smart to begin with. I instead asked for wisps from other races to join him. I can't guess what races those were but he came out as a fairly well adjusted creature. His body was also different from the rest, taller, more human in stature, though a normal goblin was still bigger.

I talked with him for some time about my knowledge of things from my world. He seemed to catch on quickly and suddenly technology didn't seem so far out of reach. Ah, the civilization I craved may not just be a pipedream anymore.

I took him to spend time with Darionus and Kalapract in the reliquary, when I went to bring them meat and water. Darionus had me open the other rooms, one full of staff, scepters and wands. One held various tools, none of which I understood the use for, and the last was a vast library brimming with ancient tomes, amber and two metal golems. The three of them together should be able to come up with some interesting creations and now Darionus can come and go freely so I shouldn't have to bring them food and drink any longer.

When I returned Ralphus had brought Barzealis, whose voice returned when Eunice was consumed. He told me he had smoothed everything over with the rest of the faculty and elder necromancers of the academy. His testimony was all they needed as he had mentored many of them and was a person most looked up to more than Eunice. He told me that at some point I would need to meet with them myself and become the headmaster through official channels.

When I finished his body, I happened to mention Darionus. His eyes lit up; apparently Darionus was the previous headmaster. He had mentored both Barzealis and Eunice until he died in his sleep. Though Barzealis always had some doubt about that, and even more when his body

disappeared. It apparently raised quite a stir around the academy.

I told him I needed to get back to work and he left saying that they'd all be waiting for me to convene the meeting.

I didn't need or want to be headmaster. At least not forever, I just needed to their strength. I was happy to feel many new pulling sensations forming. Soon this place will once again be the domain of the dark god.

I resumed my work.

The imps were very intelligent and humble if a little too inquisitive. All had been beloved familiars who I could only guess were put here because their masters didn't want to let them go. Oddly enough an imp is a creature that seems to be made of a union of magic and flesh. Meaning that when remaking their bodies I had to pour in mana which actually allowed me to gain a new ability.

Mana Fill:

I can fill in missing parts of my body with mana. The parts only last for as long as I have the mana to sustain them.

I waved my hand creating several blue spectral copies, then moved them all together. For a flesh golem this has many uses.

I grew out massive wings around eighteen feet to either side of myself. Flight has always been too impractical for me with my weight and if you added the muscle and weight of the wings needed, it would mean my wings would have to be even bigger. But if they're spectral then they don't add weight. I made spectral copies then returned the borrowed flesh to Fernando.

I flew a lap around the almost endless room. Now, if only I didn't have to create the flesh version first I would be set.

A blood arrow went harmlessly through my mana wings followed by a harsh yell. "You motherfucker!"

Ah, Sid's awake. I wouldn't put up with this guy, but his god helped me when I needed it most and he himself

promised never to go near Caroline again.

I landed and he began to form swirling blood blades. "Good timing, I'm bringing back Eva now."

His blades stopped and returned to his body. "Get to it, you rotten son of bitch, before I kick your ass!"

"Need I remind you who has kicked whose ass so far?"

"Shut the fuck up, it's just a bad match. If you didn't do that draining thing I'd clearly win."

"Yep, but I'm a bloody flesh golem, manipulating flesh is kinda my thing and blood is easier to move than muscle."

"Man, fu—"

"Chill your tits Legolas, I'm busy. That is unless you want to live inside me again or spend another week like a shitty ice sculpture."

He was practically frothing at the mouth with anger. "You just bring her back you piece of shit!"

"Ooh, so much angst! I'm terrified—"

And there goes my head again. This time as I was fumbling around in the darkness someone handed me something. Smooth, round, check. I fleshcrafted it back on and... Nothing.

I removed it and someone placed something that felt familiar on my neck. I fleshcrafted it and... I'm holding an asscheek.

I blinked several times while Sid rolled around laughing. Where did he even find this? It's all zombies in...

"John..." A hand on my shoulder squeezed down tightly. I turned to see Ralphus with a tear forming in his eye. "Do you think you could return that?"

Sid just cackled louder as I mended Ralphus. Poor Ralphus, he's had a rough day.

I thought briefly about using Petrifying Gaze on Sid again, but I had other things to do.

I continued speaking with the imps. Imps are non-combatants, their height was below that of a goblin's and their bodies were frail and skinny. To my surprise they didn't

want to be any bigger or tougher nor did they want any cosmetic changes. Humble folk here.

Their main points were large floppy ears, large eyes, and small wings that obviously couldn't support flight. Apparently at some point they learned to fly through magic and their wings deteriorated over the following generations.

I spoke for a while with the elder and the strategist. Ralphus finally brought me a map and I took the two of them to the reliquary. I got them up to speed on what was happening with my town, which I marked. I then told them about the crusade which will likely strike from the north. Now maybe by the time I'm done here I'll have a strategy.

I returned to see Sid doing a sonic the hedgehog impression. Maybe if I wait longer he'll jump off the stage and kill himself.

I sighed and gathered my resolution. It rubbed me the wrong way to bring back Eva when Liz lies dead. This isn't right... But Eva's cult could be an asset, and I need any who could be of help to protect everyone else. For my people, I need her and Sid. Maybe it's karma that now she would fight for the people Liz loved after she killed so many of Liz's childhood friends.

I didn't know where Eva's body went, but I had a suspicion that she was likely kept as a mockery, meaning her headless corpse was likely laying here somewhere.

I brought her soul forward. She was indeed beautiful, perhaps the most attractive natural beauty I had seen, but the twins didn't respond. There was nothing but rot and bile under that flawless skin. I seperated her into her own soul screen.

"Do you know who I am?"

"No my lord. But I follow one more powerful than you and she—"

"I met her. Together we eroded part of Theresa's fake world. I didn't see her for that long, but I could still feel part of who she was when she touched me and your actions do

not suit her. She is kind, fierce, but kind. She would not sacrifice friends and family and she probably doesn't like that you did it in her name."

"How do know—"

"Do you remember a girl named Evangelina Lireathia Nexializ?"

Her fake smile vanished and her eyes stared at the floor. "Yes... How is she?"

"She's gone now. I loved her, the same one that killed you killed her, but her I can not bring back. You know what that means right? She lies dead and you'll live again." I couldn't help but to raise my voice. "You did such horrible things to her! You killed her friends and ruined her life all while pretending to be some mother figure! Your pretty little head should be a torch but I'm bringing you back."

She nodded. "Was she... Was she happy?"

"I'd like to think so. She finally had a family, friends. She didn't have to beg in the streets. She taught children reading, writing and magic. She was... She was... Loved and she loved back just as hard. She..."

I closed my eyes unable to fight my sadness. Spectral arms wrapped around me. "I loved her too. I loved them all but it had to be done or we'd all be hunted to extinction. Each and every one, I remember all their names their faces, their smiles. Do you know what it's like to be hunted?"

I separated from her and dried my face. "I'm the reason for the crusade. I'm the dark god. Soon my people will need me and sadly that means I need you, your cult and Sid."

She lifted my face to meet hers. "Then we have an enemy in common!"

"For now. What did you want from the Academy? Why were you starving them out?"

"We needed a book, we also wanted to reclaim Rosereth's bow. To fight a champion you have to use the power of a god."

Then maybe I can beat this champion myself.

"What was the book?"

"Rosereth's journal. As an item that belonged to her when she was mortal, it contains her power. With those two things, even if it would be suicide to take in a god's power, we could kill the champion."

"And who was to use those two things?"

"...I was."

"Very well, I'll see you on the other side."

There's something strange about her. Like she doesn't understand what she's done. I think if the realization of her actions ever cut through her justifications, she would crumble. Maybe that's why she wanted to use the bow and the book. Some sort of redemption with a quick death and martyrdom to boot. *Sorry, Eva, I won't allow you to go out like a saint. I've decided you'll live with what you did.*

I recreated her body perfectly and added in all abilities but I didn't infuse her soul. Instead I thought of the wendigo. Its heart was a natural soul prison with a high amount of soul storage. It would put red amber to shame. I had rejected it on the grounds that I didn't want to bind a person, and at the time I didn't know that someone could be alive and still have a soul prison. But Barzealis and Eunice proved that, by being liches that still had physical bodies.

I gathered ichor from the surrounding zombies and compressed it until it was a crystal about the size of a fist. I then inserted it into her body as Sid looked on with concern. I started her heart and infused her soul into the ichor without binding it to me. It's a bit dangerous because she's an unbound, well, living person. Which means a necromancer could easily kill her, but now she won't die from taking in Rosereth's power, at least that's my hope. That end is too easy for her.

I took her and Sid to the reliquary. Despite Sid's fussing, the two of them didn't seem that close, or rather she seemed to be friendly to him and he shrugged her off.

They're both terrible people; they deserved one another.

My guess is that she needed a blood elemental to cause a disturbance and fight the army so she could get a shot in on the champion. Not a bad strategy, but is Sid immune to heals? Now that I think about it he's not undead and he's blessed by Rosereth so perhaps he is.

Chapter 22

I returned and started on the canine Kobolds. These guys were kinda cute. It took all of thirty seconds to prove I was stronger and after that they hung around me wagging their tails and sniffing anything I picked up. I had granted them all abilities but I wasn't sure how useful they would be. Still, they were larger than a goblin and shorter than a person. They seemed to be fast and could run on all fours. They lacked any kind of magic though, and their offensive abilities were mainly in their fangs and claws. One particularly large alpha stood in front of me with a menacing expression. I looked back at him and he barked. I taught them all English, so there's no need for that.

I scratched his head behind the ears. "Who's a fearsome boy? Yes you are, you're just so fearsome."

He growled while his tail wagged. "Do not patronize me you... you..." I found his weak spot. "I am, I'm a fearsome boy."

"That's right, now go get it!" I threw a leg and he ran off. Well, he tried.

I then started restoring the lizardkin Kobolds.

My gobs might not like seeing these guys considering what happened in the past though I somehow doubt these are the same ones given the level of degradation.

They were almost human sized. They'd probably give some of the hobgoblins a run for their money in a strength contest—and here I always thought Kobolds were one of the weaker monsters.

I first spoke to the flame tongue. It could actually breathe fire. Yeah, either these kobolds are not all made from lizardmen or lizardmen have dragon ancestry. Again, where

the hell are the dragons? I've seen a dungeon so... Eh, maybe not, I found out it was a spell not an ability.

Either way, these Kobolds were useful. Ambushers, trapmakers, if I teamed them up with the canine Kobolds they would be able to track with the best of them as well. *Brilliant, I now have a guerilla tactics unit at my disposal.*

Next was goblins, good old goblins!

But first I needed to talk with their chief. I separated him from the rest and showed him my gobs and that I was also a chief. He was thoroughly impressed. As it turns out the Red Clan was just as green as the rest, but was called that because of their brutality. He himself was a survivor of several complete wipes by humans and had learned from their tactics. He and his gobs were finally undone when they dived into the barrier around the dark academy and were lost until they were half starved, after that necromancers easily killed them.

Like my gobs, they too appreciated the upgrades and beautification. The red chief was the only one who wanted more. In the end he became a hulking brute that stood a full head taller than me. He had serrated teeth and spiked knuckles. He thanked me kindly, then began rallying his gobs.

The shamans were something new to me. My gobs didn't have magic, but these guys could build totems that had various effects including healing and weakness. Nothing too powerful, but it could be useful in larger battles.

They went a ways out and began eating as I started on the hobgoblins.

The hobgoblins were extremely degraded, meaning they had been here for an incredible amount of time. They were shorter than a person, but somehow had greater strength. I spoke first to the hobgoblin lord. His people had come about through unconventional means. Usually a hobgoblin is the result of goblins capturing a human female. But in this case, it was the opposite. Hobgoblins reach maturity at a similar

speed to goblins, so some feudal lord subjugated a goblin village and used the females to make an army that would otherwise take a lot more time. As such they were taught by humans and used as soldiers.

I wonder if Pervy Guy might be descended from this feudal lord. With them, now enhanced by my gifts, I had a trained battalion, though it only numbered around a hundred.

On to the dwarves!

I didn't see a clear leader among them so I opted to restore the legendary blacksmith first. Bushy browed, heavy bearded, barrel chested, big bellied. Yes, these were dwarves!

As I was speaking with him he noticed the ale and downed almost half the barrel as we spoke.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I had obtained a valuable person. It also didn't hurt matters that he reminded me of quite a few friends I had back in my old world. I restored the rest and took him and the siege master to the reliquary. There he made his way between the armor room and the weapon room while I returned to my work.

The remaining dwarves sat drunkenly laughing with the gnomes. Now that I look at them together, aren't gnomes just skinnier, miniature dwarves?

I then began bringing back the humans, but I was careful which ones I brought back. The clergyman I conversed with briefly acted as you would expect, calling me a blasphemer and all the non-humans monstrosities and abominations. I then told him that I actually had a creature called an abomination and his soul would work wonders towards restoring it.

I hadn't even looked at the abomination yet, but I could imagine it wasn't pretty.

I converted the clergyman's memories, personality, spells and skills to mana, leaving a new fresh blank slate soul, though it's percentage was only around 40.

Just what the hell was a clergyman doing here anyway? Trying to convert the necromancers?

The rest went easy. The mercenaries were fresh souls sent to scout out what the cult of Rosereth was doing. They ended up getting killed by a flesh golem and brought in by Eunice with the rest of the cult.

They asked for compensation, to which I told them of the enhancements I would give them. They agreed to follow me until things got too dangerous. I agreed, after all these guys have families to get back to and they hadn't done anything to me personally. Though just to be safe I showed them what I did to the mercs that came to my village to hunt my gobs.

The sage was an old soul badly degraded. I was unable to talk to him, which was a shame as wisdom is a sage's mainstay. I told him he'd have to find another to combine with.

The warlocks and the witch were all wisps; I combined them with the sage and finally got a full person, well, 80 percent, but they could function.

With such an interesting combination I had to look at their affinities.

Dark: Master
Nature: Advanced
Light: Intermediate
Infernal: Intermediate
Wind: Advanced
Earth: Advanced

Wow, they might be the strongest caster yet. But their spells are mostly question marks excluding the familiar dark spells I already had. If I show them a magic book, it probably won't be long before they gain back their former glory.

The body they had me build was a unique one, appearing as a slender person, somewhat androgynous and with short

swept-back hair. I gave them a redundant mana-gathering heart and mana-gathering hair, on top of the other gifts.

They had no ideas about a name so I opted to let them pick one in time, for now it doesn't matter. They weren't even using I or me yet. I moved on after having Ralphus fetch them a beginner's magic book from Barzealis's collection.

The Therossian Knights were human supremacists and I enjoyed turning them into blank slate souls, but I did take their skills for myself. I was now 10/10 in swordsmanship, and shield work. My max mana still hadn't gone up because it was constantly being depleted from my trips back and forth from the reliquary, which cost around 5,000 each way.

Their Lord was more reasonable. It seemed like he'd only been here for short while as he was aware of the crusade's existence. He himself was coming here to the dark academy in search of someone who could help him find his daughter who never made it to Therograd.

This familiar story had my stomach in knots. I recounted to him what happened to the girls that were sent for the Duke's son. He broke down in tears and bowed to me, pleading that I help find his daughter.

I agreed, of course. His slightly curly blonde hair gave me a hint as to who he might be searching for and his tears were honest. He really did care for his daughter. I would ask him if Blondie was her, but I never actually heard her full name.

I remade him as he was and granted him all abilities. If Blondie was indeed his, then I'd want them to be similar.

With dread I interrogated the Garanthi Axemen who were apparently bandits.

Like the others I'd spoken to before, they were saddened by their actions as bandits but they weren't part of Thads's men. Instead they were stuck here after the war ended and turned to the only thing they knew in order to live. They had however laid waste to a few towns and were no strangers to

murdering innocents though never women or children as it was dishonorable. Their teachings however don't differentiate between farmers and soldiers. When it came to men they were merciless.

I had them kneel and swear on their honor to serve me. I offered them redemption for their past crimes and a chance to strike back at Theross and their goddess. They gladly agreed and like that, I received a band of the most feared warriors in the land. I gave them horns and enhanced their strength more than the others as a reward. I can't wait to see what they'll accomplish.

The light-attuned healers made me nervous but I wanted to be fair so I questioned them anyway.

Just as I suspected all but one were racist idiots. I converted the others into blank slate souls and combined them with the smart one. I quickly moved on.

The ancient sorcerer was unable to speak. His soul lingered at 8% and I was sad to see that I might not be able to restore him. It was the same with the death cultist who was even worse off. Being zombified is better than being dead when it comes to soul degradation, but it still happens.

I combined them together with all the heroes' souls and got a strange result. Perhaps because I forced it, I got a soul amalgamation. I ended up having to use another blank slate soul for stability. In the end it seems the blank slate soul had more of a presence than the others and I got a person like Healer.

I crafted them a body, and sent them to wander the zombie room. I have zero expectations for that one and to be honest it's a little sad. But unlike Healer they should have a fighting chance because I know there are memories inside. Maybe one day something will cause them to awaken.

Ah Satyrs, should I bring them back? I managed to withstand Pervy Guy, but I also had a lot of help from my

mates. Perhaps without a Pervy Guy they'd behave. Still, I'm kinda surprised they don't have a bard satyr.

I informed them of my decision to make them female. They were however formless phantoms at about 30%, so I couldn't tell their original genders, let alone if they understood. It seems mana capacity and ego play a large role in how a person maintains their mind after degradation. These two didn't have it, so I combined them and crafted their body. It was easy enough as I myself had some of their DNA, but maybe I went a bit too far into my own preferences.

I was soon staring intently at a sexy, horned, goat woman. She smiled up at me and stretched, arching her back and giving me an eyeful. Yeah, this satyress may be more dangerous than I'd thought.

"Go find clothes please!"

She smiled up at me and spread her legs slowly. I quickly threw one of the robes at her and made my retreat. Though my body reacts, my mind isn't in the mood right now, not after...

I set about restoring the elves.

They were a haughty bunch; in many ways their hatred of humans mirrored the humans' disdain for other races. I didn't care, the humans of this world are the worst, though most of that may be because of Theresa's teachings.

To my surprise they weren't as deteriorated as the rest; likely because of their long lives they were able to maintain their sense of identity.

The last one I restored was the aristocrat. I was taken aback that she was a woman, graceful and frail. Innocent eyes as green as the lushest forest and long ears that swept back. There was no mistaking an elf for a half elf. She tucked a strand of platinum blonde hair behind her ear and I nearly lost it, my sadness returning. Still I moved forward and caressed her long ears, tears streaming down my face. Perhaps I just wanted to feel it again.

Her men yelled in outrage, hurling threats and looking for weapons. She held out a hand to stop them and began rubbing my ears as well.

Her large eyes met mine, her face flushed. "Is this a custom of your people? For us this is a proposal."

"It isn't a custom. I just need to touch them, you reminded me of someone and... She was someone very close to me. I-I'm sorry."

She wiped my eyes and watched as her skin turned black where she had touched my tears.

There were gasps from the other elves but she ignored them. The one word I gleaned from them was "source" over and over again. Their murmurings finally stopped when the tears absorbed into her skin and it returned to its normal pale color.

She smiled at me while covering her chest with one arm. "I'm sorry, but I'm not the one you lost. I still want to thank you humbly for bringing us all back. And in return," she bowed and the rest followed, "we swear to follow you; your enemies are our enemies. Your happiness is our happiness. I accept your proposal. Call me Lireanthia."

I blinked, taking a minute to process what had happened as gasps came from all around us. One man clapped happily, he was different than the rest, though. The only way I knew he was a man was because I had crafted everything below the waist. He shouted. "Dear sister, this is a grand occasion, bring out the wine..." He paused for a moment and looked around. "Well, imagine we have wine!"

I couldn't help but to laugh. I gave her a robe and took the two of them to the reliquary.

She rubbed my ears again and I reappeared in the zombie room to the glares of her people. What a mess.

I shewed them off but they lingered, all but growling. The dwarves saw this and began pulling them away to share in what they called the famous ale of the Necromancers.

Now for the dar... *Someone's humping me.*

I turned around to see the satyress smiling back at me as she continued her efforts. I pulled her off me and faced her. She was breathing hard as she looked me over.

"Look here, you, I'm busy right now, and if we were to mate then we'd probably be at it for days with our dispositions. I just don't have time for that now, so." I teleported her to the reliquary and warped back before she could say anything.

I began restoring the dark elves; like the last ones they were abundantly anti-human, and they were also anti pretty much everyone else. Still there wasn't any real hostility there, it was more like someone who had been scorned. They were hated, therefore they hate.

I noted that their bodies were decidedly more muscular and their mana was slightly less but they were every bit as strong. I ended on the Underking who, though overly proud, was still grateful. He and his dark elves bowed to me and I accepted their pledge. They seemed to be enamored by my dark god status and again I heard the word "source" tossed around. I didn't speak elvish so perhaps that was the only word that translated to english well enough. Either way they would definitely follow me to the edges of the world and back, and I was grateful to have them.

I was now feeling good about my army. We were brimming with powerful individuals but we lacked a real frontline soldier, at least numerically.

Next I restored the centaurs. They were a proud bunch, though I only had a handful of them. It turns out they were part of some performance group along with the satyrs from earlier. One of the former headmasters bought them and they were added to his collection of zombies. *Really, is this pokemon? Were they trying to catch 'em all?*

I moved on to the orcs. It was obvious why these guys became zombies. They were in many way the physical peak of all other creatures. They had in inordinate amount of strength for their size and the shamans even managed to

maintain a bit of their former luster in soul form. From the degradation alone I could guess that most were made zombies around ten years ago. They must have been hunted because they were such an asset. As I thought, it explains the small amount of warg riders and possibly the sha'dwarg population in the area.

The orcish language was strange and I found that I half understood certain parts of it as they were english words. It was a bit like comparing Creole to English, then adding in more grunts and random yelling.

To my surprise the orcs were quick to bend the knee. I was apparently foretold by one of their shamans. When I heard that, I felt a dark embrace and figured out the rest. It's likely I had at least one past life as an orc and during that time I once again met the god of darkness. But still I wouldn't have known english, there must be another. The questions continue to mount and all I can confirm is that there have been more from my world here in this one.

They sang for me their tribal songs and I couldn't help but feel alive again. I played them some GWAR and they began to thrash about. Yep, the one from my world must have taught them metal. After playing a few more songs I recreated their bodies with all abilities and infused their souls.

Half of them quickly joined the now-nervous gnomes and the robust dwarves in a drink. Most of the elves had passed out due to low alcohol tolerance. And an out of breath Ralphus came back down the stairs with another barrel of ale and was greeted with cheers.

I interrogated the hogmen orcs. This lot was extremely degraded. I combined most and ended up with only a handful of them. I'd turned the slaver into a blank slate soul to restore the devourer. They were all greedy, gluttonous and selfish, but still loyal and intelligent.

They stood a foot shorter than their green counterparts but had every bit as much ugly muscle. They bowed and I

welcomed them. Though I worry that in this famine-stricken kingdom, they may soon become a problem. They eagerly began devouring the zombies, leaving not even the bones.

The lizardmen had their own honor system and acknowledged me as a being of strength. As such they bowed and submitted to my will. Their leadership system wasn't that different from goblins. The strongest male was made chief and the first breeding rights went to him. I wasn't really eager to breed a lizard however but I will still take the chief position. The dragonewt was the real surprise. His soul held strong at 80%; just how long did he live before becoming a zombie? It too knew many spells that were lost to time and its stature towered over me with its long neck and large head. If I were human, I would be terrified to encounter this thing in a dark alley.

He was shockingly intelligent and we conversed for some time while I restored the rest. As a bonus to him I granted a second mana generating heart. He smiled at me... *At least I think that's a smile. It's hard to tell.* Anyway he insisted on teaching me some of his magics. I politely refused, as right now I didn't have the time. He bowed, but lingered, his eyes fixed on me. There was something there, some feeling I couldn't quite identify. I just transferred him to the reliquary where I was immediately jumped by the satyress and had to warp away once more.

She's definitely persistent. In better times I wouldn't have refused her offer, but I've been bound for too long and my people are at risk. There's also the other thing. Really, all I want is to curl up someplace quiet with my mates and commiserate. I need their support, but now is the time to fight for their lives. All that I'm doing here is for them!

I both quickly started and quickly finished the trolls. The guardian of shiniess demanded shiniess and I gave him the depleted amber. They seemed to sense that I was part rock troll and pledged to follow me. I gratefully accepted. In all likelihood there may not be a better tank than a troll. Rock

trolls had both a high defense as well as built in regeneration, swamp troll had no defence but took regeneration to the next level. The guardian of shinies apparently had both in abundance. All in all they were excellent grunts.

Jesus, I'm tired of this; it's been a couple days at least and I need to either sleep or go undead. I switched to undead mode and continued. I won't rot that quickly, I only have a few left.

The ogres were similar to the trolls, simple folk with no ambition. They only wanted to prove their strength and although deteriorated they still maintained their sense of self.

One was smarter but not by much. They agreed to help me out of gratitude but I had to convince them not to eat the others by threatening to return them to soul form.

The giants, as it turns out, were highly intelligent despite the stereotype, and the wise king lived up to his name, grasping immediately the situation he was in and also the situation I faced. Like the elves, giants lived long lives—maybe the longest. As a result they all maintained that strong sense of self and I was able to reason with them. They quickly bowed, though even then they stood several yards above me. My onis would look like toddlers to them and I like an action figure.

There was one giant female, a hurler I believe, that seemed to take an interest in me. No, just no. To her, my whole body would only just be enough to satisfy her. I'll not be breaking off more than I can chew here. Not that I would have a say if she really tried.

I sighed; all that remains now are the beasts.

As expected, in general they weren't as controllable. The Wargs were the easiest. After I brought them back they rushed to their orc masters and had a happy reunion. The Behemoth was completely unresponsive with only 3%. I tried adding in blank slate souls but with a heavy heart I had

to give up. I turned it into a blank slate soul and absorbed its spells, which were costly and earth based.

I gained:

Tremor:

With this I'm able to cause a localized earthquake. If there are any sinkholes then the effect is magnified.

Without having any earth affinity this spell is almost unusable with it's massive mana cost of 10,000/second.

Meteor:

I'm able to assemble large masses of earth above the clouds and let them fall.

Cost 15,000/second.

Earth Breath:

I can release a fine stone powder from my mouth in a cone in front of me. It has a chance to stick and petrify anyone caught in it. Cost 500/second.

I guess I could use the last one, though I have better methods.

The Ouroboros had some intelligence and, after I taught it english, could even converse. I hated the stretched S sounds it made but recognized that they were just how it wanted to sound. Strangely enough it chose a mostly human body instead of its snake form. I thought this strange but proceeded anyway as it informed me of its spells.

Apparently its current form was in fact a transformation spell it had. It normally took the guise of a human woman. As per legend it would ask to spend the night and should the family refuse, it would devour them, bone and all.

I smiled and asked if she would devour me. She remained silent but I still brought her back. A sense of humor is always valued. Scaley though she was, she was also attractive and humble. Though the warnings were still there. I knew better than to mistreat her or deny her her basic rights. Food, shelter and companionship. It was a small price to pay in exchange for her giant snake form. I moved on.

The Basilisk was a genuine beast. It had a set of fake eyes above its real eyes. The fake ones did nothing but serve as a distraction for the real ones. It was intelligent enough to understand that I was the one that decided its freedom and the one that decided whether it lived or died here. Its body was like that of a large iguana. I brought it back, imparted all gifts, and it slithered off into the darkness. I had a bit of a foreboding feeling but chose to put my faith in it, that it wouldn't attack anyone.

I next restored the griffins. Their souls were deteriorated but they were apparently a part of an entertainment troupe that included the satyrs and centaurs. As a result of their previous training they were easy to command. I'm not exactly the mama bird typem but I played the part and fed them zombie chunks despite the laughter and guffaws of the drunken onlookers. Damnit, don't they see the effort I'm putting in? Yeah I certainly fought the urge to vomit, but in exchange I gained two powerful flying allies.

The Cobbled Manticore was an obvious attempt to recreate a mythical beast in flesh golem form. Its soul was a grotesque amalgamation of man and animal. I spoke the hallowed names of Rhett and Link but it didn't respond. Instead I used the the blank slate soul from the behemoth. After adding that soul for stability, it calmed down and yielded to me. Arguably Wendy's mother was similarly designed, but this was the beast itself. I felt pride as I restored it to the form it was meant to take. Many of the others cowered before it except the dwarves, who were too drunk, and the elves, who were still passed out.

Ralphus whistled. "You've done something big here!"

I laughed as it knelt and I gave it pat on the head. "Wait till I get to the wyvern."

"The wyv... By the void, you'd best be sure you have control of that thing before you bring it back!" He looked at the manticore and it smiled back showing its three rows of pointed teeth. Ralphus shivered as he spoke. "I'm off to get

more ale and robes." He hurried up the stairs as the manticores began to eat their fill of zombie meat.

I looked around, sat with the dwarves and took a large drink of ale. Supposedly this could get me drunk if I wasn't working in undead mode. I restarted my heart and the fatigue hit me like a tonne of bricks. I quickly switched back. I'll need to rest soon, my brain is set on passing out.

I looked around the room to see where everyone was at. The Orcs had found their former bodies and retrieved their clothes and armor. The dark elves were nowhere to be seen, but when I used Life Sense I saw them some distance away, likely looting their former bodies for equipment. The elves were still lying here nude, having let their pride convince them they could outdrink a dwarf. The Ouroboros had no need of clothing as it appeared when she changed back to human form. I think it's likely that she's not an Ouroboros at all but a shapeshifter. It makes me wonder what other forms she could take. Well, if she decides to stay with us I'll ask her about it later.

I had no clue what the ones in the reliquary were doing but the humans here were mostly sleeping except the Garanthi who were sharpening their axes and training with the hobgoblins. The Kobolds of both types and the goblins I had brought back watched the spectacle while staying well away from the manticores who ate feverishly and the basilisk who hid behind bodies, its false eyes giving away its location. The centaurs and the griffins were getting along well, as was expected. The warriors prepped for war; everyone else just fraternized. Things were both relaxed and tense at the same time.

God I've been down here too long.

I took a deep breath and started on the homunculus.

Its form was not exactly as expected. It had no hair to speak of, as if its skin came from some large hairless animal, and it had no gender to speak of, having been a created entity. Its eyes showed intelligence but it seemed to

lack the sense to speak. Still it reacted when I touched it. Why would someone make something like this, was it an attempt to create a more human looking zombie? The fact that its soul was still in fair condition indicates that it was made fairly recently, maybe another of Eunice's experiments.

Either way I'll bring back this enigma, though it's hard to tell if it ever lived at all. I gave it all gifts and formed it into a cohesive person. I taught it english and to my surprise it thanked me.

After that it simply followed me around silently, it had no expression on its face and no need to cover up as it had nothing to hide. Huh, this is strange. Oh well, it's not hurting anything so I guess I'll let it do what it wants.

And now for the abomination. I'm a little excited, what could this thing be?

I approached its cage to see it in soulform. It had two heads with massive disjointed jaws, four arms and four legs. Two of its arms were freakishly long and curved inward. It reminded me of camel spider. All around it miasma leaked out, similar to my own darkness. Just what the hell was I looking at here? It saw me and stopped as still as a statue. I blinked and it had moved right next to the cage, one of its long arms stretched out towards me. I jumped back. "Jesus!"

It repeated, "Jeezusss."

I don't know if the fact it was a specter made things better or worse here, but I had a promise to keep. I combined its soul with the blank slate made from the cleric earlier and taught it english.

It began making strange noises that slowly became words as it turned away from me. "Good, yes, bad, no, YESSS!"

An experiment, I blinked again. I felt the stiff hairs of its claw-like hand on my cheek as its beady eyes stared into mine. "Yesss, good!"

It gently stroked my face, sending goosebumps down my skin. "I guess that means you like me?"

"YESSS!"

"And earlier when I blinked?"

It remained silent and began preening its fangs. "NO!"

I guess it was a transition from pure instinct to some semblance of reason. The white pupils in its four black eyes darted down to the floor and I followed their gaze. I was also emitting darkness as if in response.

Ah, so that's what it is.

This thing is half insect, half human maybe? And definitely the result of some ritual, a ritual that involved dark magic. I brought back a summoner, so I'll ask him at some point.

I crafted its terrible body and gave it all gifts including mimic. As I thought I was able to communicate with it both through speech and through pheromones. I ordered it not to eat a living person without first checking with me and it slinked off into the darkness. For a while I stood there fighting the urge to blink but when I did, it didn't return.

Lastly the Wyvern, then I rest! After observing it for a time It became clear it was intelligent. I taught it English and we began speaking. It told tales of times before man. Of things that once roamed these lands when they were lush and prey was abundant. So that's why it's not degraded, it's likely been here as long as it lived before. More life equals more soul to burn. I showed it pictures of cities from my world and we spoke about things like architecture as it had taken an interest in skyscrapers and the statue of liberty. He said he never dreamed such puny lifeforms could build things so huge. He remarked on the internet that my people must be the smartest race to have ever existed with infinite knowledge at our fingertips. I laughed and played him some youtube videos. Though he was fascinated, he took back his comment.

"It occurs to me we haven't been introduced yet, I'm John."

"I'm—" He roared loud enough that my non-existent eardrums shook.

"Ah, afraid I can't pronounce that."

It dipped its head and smiled. "Then you, my new friend, may name me."

No! I'm too tired for this shit! He looked at me expectantly. Fine, fine. Fuck Drogon, I'm naming him Drogon... Argh, I can't do it, he's not even a dragon. Shit was there a named wyvern that I can remember? No, nothing comes to mind. Let's just put a bunch of strange consonants together and see what comes out. Azzmus, no that sounds like he can't breath right. Azmodius, nope, that's a demon name if ever I heard one. Okay then Aylzrocrym the hell is that it's like brain vomit. Steve, we're calling him steve. I looked back up at him, those eyes meeting mine full of expectation. I sighed, he's kinda like a bat with the way he walks and the way his wings work so. Ah, there was this goth chick I dated once, she had a pet bat. What was its name? I'm sure it had something to do with vodka or gin. Uh... Vesper...something? Add to that reptilian.

"I shall name you Vespertillion or Vesp for short."

"Hmm, it's interesting, I'll accept it! In turn allow me to name you!"

"Uh, I'm John."

"No, I mean in my language."

"Huh... Okay then."

He bellowed once more spraying me with saliva as I felt his hot breath.

I wiped my face. "You know I can't say that, right? What does it mean?"

"Hmm, an approximation would be...baldy."

We laughed; this guy's alright. Why did Ralphus have such a reaction to him? I decided to ask.

"I have a necromancer friend who was worried about me bringing you back, why is that?"

"Oh, necromancers, huh." He laughed a low throaty laugh. "I thought I wiped them out."

And that would be why.

"No, they're still alive and strong. They're also currently my allies, so I ask that you not harm them."

"I never intended to, until they sought to make me a trophy. My memories are vague, but I'm guessing the last one got in a lucky shot, considering I'm talking to you in this form."

"I don't intend to make a trophy of you, only an ally. After my people are safe I'll not ask anything else of you. You'll be free to do whatever you desire."

He laughed again. "Good John, if you bring me back, I can do whatever I fancy anyway. It's a good thing I like you or I would eat you whole to gain my freedom."

"Good thing indeed."

He doesn't realize that if I was inside his body, I would just use fleshcrafting to stop his heart and be done with it. But he's playing nice and I'll allow him his pride.

"Alright Vesp, I'll see you on the other side."

He nodded and I got to work on recreating his body. If this room wasn't so cast I could find it and save myself some trouble, but there's no way.

The homunculus watched my every move as I worked. Eventually Vesp's form was complete and I checked with him that it met his specifications. I infused his soul and he let loose a mighty roar as soon as he was conscious. All other creatures craned their necks to see him, and many dived behind bodies and even the mantichore cowered.

I laughed. "Welcome back to the land of the living!"

His voice came directly into my head, "I live again!"

I laughed again, this guy just loves scaring the crap out of people. I do too, but he might be better at it.

"Alright my friend, eat your fill of zombie flesh. I have a few more to speak to, then I'll rest for a while."

He nodded and was off. I'd given him all the gifts that everyone else got which means he might well be stronger now than he was before. Still, he's a good dude.

I had one last task. To speak with the founders I got from the statues.

I found them all together. Their soul percentages were all around 70%. I took that to mean they weren't zombified. Perhaps petrified by some lost magic, their souls sealed within a stone shell.

Two of them greeted me with bows and two ignored me completely. Ha, more snobs. If only I still had Thrall here, he was likely from around their time. I couldn't even mention his name because he never gave it.

I separated them into their own soul screen and replayed the events with Eunice to break the ice and show them where I was at.

Again two accepted me, and two seemed to be shunning me.

I restored two of them to life and granted them all abilities. They were a man and woman. I asked them why they accepted me when the other two didn't. In response they reminded me that Fernando broke their statues, and even though Eunice was screwed up, it was I who opposed her. Which made me an enemy for going against a headmaster of the dark academy.

Well, it's too late to put them back into the statues, but I don't think it's a good idea to bring them back either. At least not at the moment as I still need to win over the rest of the necromancers and having two of their ancestors speak out against me would be detrimental.

I thanked the two who supported me, gave them robes and had Ralphus show them what the academy had become during their centuries-long rest.

Finally, it's time to rest. I found a spot away from everyone and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 23

My dreams were not pleasant. The events that had happened echoed through my mind. Mors as she called out for me, and Liz as she mouthed the words 'not your fault.'

Something warm covered me and I opened my eyes to see Vesp with his wing draped over me like a blanket. I fell back to sleep, and this time my dreams were of the ones who still lived. My heart ached to see them again. A vision like a hellish landscape overwhelmed me as smiling paladins drove my people to dust. Smiling, laughing and feeling justified that they'd done their goddess's work.

This time when I awoke, there was no one around me, though I heard faint screams in the distance. There was a hiss and Fernando stood several yards away. Was he hissing at me?

I looked around me and the zombies that were there had disappeared. A perfect circle of clean ground was under me as I noticed dark pulses coming from my core. I tried to stand but I was heavier. My hands had turned to claws, my teeth to massive fangs, and the process didn't seem to be over yet. I focused to stop it and gradually things returned to normal but there was still fear in the air. Even Vesp looked on from the darkness. Part of his wing, gone.

I approached him and he winced when I touched his missing wing. I used the excess I had somehow gained and mended him before returning to my normal form.

I had torn through the almost indestructible boots and the bottoms of the pants as my feet had changed form into reverse legged talons.

Being a flesh golem has its drawbacks.

I apologized to everyone and Fernando returned to my side, with the abomination in tow. Sure enough, it speaks

pheromones and Fernando has made a friend.

I used the pendant and returned to the reliquary. The ones here had apparently been busy. Kalapract especially as he now had one silver eye and metal skin on half his head.

I showed Darionus the boots and he guided me to another pair. These had properties that would make them match the user's feet. Maybe they could hold on for a little longer. I put them on and looked, Nothing special here, just black leather boots.

I sighed, no more ominous hovering for me. Kalapract sat beside me and picked up the busted boots. "Do you mind if I?"

"Knock yourself out."

He began chanting and the grey metal began to change form. So this is how he does it. If I knew the language he was speaking then I might be able to learn something here but it seemed to be some weird mixture of long dead languages. I could pick out a word here or there that resembled elvish or old Therossian, even some forestkin.

Black swirls formed along the metal's surface and he told me to take off my new boots. After handing them to him he began chanting again and the metal seemed to bind itself to the leather. He took out a cracked orb and split it in two placing one on the shin guard of each sabaton. He handed them back to me.

"Just a little thank you for granting me access to all this. With the mana I now produce, even something as complicated as this is trivial."

I put the boots back on and they changed form to fit me. I then fleshcrafted my feet into talons and they changed to match.

"Yes! Like this I might actually be able to wear armor! Can you do this again on different pieces?"

"No, I simply mended them both and increased their power with a cracked amplification orb. I myself didn't add any effects."

I laughed and gave him a pat on the back. "Well my friend, you've done me a great service!"

I stood and got everyone's attention. The Imp Engineer and the Legendary Blacksmith were working on something and didn't turn to face me. I'm sure they can still hear so me though so that's fine.

"Everyone, we'll be leaving here soon after I have a meeting with the rest of the necromancers. Grab all you need for yourself and your people now and--"

I'm being humped again. I carefully pushed the satyress off me and continued. "Anyway, get ready to go and join everyone else in the zombie room. Darionus will guide you there when you're all ready."

I warped back to the zombie room and repeated the announcement. The elves held their ears. I can't imagine the hangover they must have.

But looking around, most people had found their former clothes and weapons, so things here seem to be progressing nicely.

I walked up the stairs and found Ralphus in the parts store. Together we met with Barzealis and convened the meeting.

I sat nervously waiting in the main hall. It had been cleaned and I could see they had began repairing the tables and benches, at least to the point of making them functional again.

Together with the two ancestors I restored, they all came pouring in, hoods up, walking with near perfect synchronicity.

Damn, this is going to be some sort of official ceremony type thing, isn't it? I've seen Eyes Wide Shut before, but most of these necromancers are older men. I somehow doubt it's an orgy I'd want to see.

I raised an eyebrow and looked toward Barzealis. He smiled back. Shit, so it is!? So much nope. At the first sign of droopy ballsack, I'm gone.

The male ancestor stood on the stage; again, why didn't I get his name? I guess they didn't really leave much of impression on me after I restored so many interesting races and creatures. To me they were just two more mostly regular people. But seeing how the others revere them, I'm starting to get nervous.

He spoke. "John Slater, we are gathered in your name to discuss your request to become headmaster but first there are other things we must discuss. All rise!"

How the hell did he know my last name?

The necromancers all stood and I followed suit.

"Now bow!"

We all bowed. Why do I feel like I'm in court?

"You may be seated. Now to first discuss John's crimes."

Ah, that would be why.

"First, he directly interfered with academy business and caused panic and disorder."

I stood. "Hey, Fernando never would have acted that way if Eunice didn't do the things she did!"

"You will be seated!" He chanted and a familiar green light lit beneath me. I channeled the darkness and eroded the floor.

"I will not be beholden to another's power! If you try to bind me again, I'll consume you!"

Shit, my emotions got the better of my common sense. That was half me, and half of the dark god's sentiment, but it did bring back some terrible memories.

Barzealis put his hand on my shoulder and I sat again as the founder locked me in an icy stare.

"If you want to be the headmaster then you will observe our traditions!" I remained silent and he continued. "Now then, I wasn't referring to your familiar. I was referring to the panic that was caused when you leaped from the academic tower."

"Ah..." Yep, I did that.

"Due to your actions an investigation was launched and several students were accused of using illusions to cause a ruckus. It was only after the faculty saw you that they were able to match the description of the falling man to you and verify that the students were innocent."

I opened my mouth to apologize but Barzealis shook his head.

"Crime two." He brought out Ralphus who was held in glowing chains. "Conspiring to kill a headmaster."

I was wondering why he disappeared right before everyone else sat down. Given his lack of panic, I know he did this voluntarily, otherwise right now I'd be pissed.

"Witness, Ralphus Obitus, from the clan Obitus. State your account and do not lie or you know what those chains will do."

"I Ralphus state that we did not plan to kill Eunice but we did conspire to remove her from her position after she--"

"Enough! You answered the question, you may be seated. I'll amend the crime to conspiring against a headmaster. John, how do you plead."

"Guilty, and I'd do it again."

There was a gasp from the crowd but he held his hands up and the quieted down.

"In light of Eunice's actions as presented by Barzealis and your deeds in saving him, this crime will be overlooked. Headmasters are not to abuse their authority nor should they shed a bad light on our academy. If people are afraid to come here then there is no academy at all." He cleared his throat and Ralphus was freed of his chains.

"Crime number three. You lost control of your familiar and cost us the lives of several students and destroyed our sacred statues. How do you plead?"

"Guilty, though--"

"Enough. You did restore the dead ones, but they have decided to leave the academy along with the some member of faculty that you and Mr. Obitus killed. This struck a blow

against our morale. For that I sentence your familiar to death."

"Ha, go right ahead if you can, but this time when you die, I'm not bringing you back."

I'm getting sick of this, this is a farce. I don't really want to be headmaster. *Shall I remind them of a few things?*

I stood and began channeling darkness all around me, infused it with unholy and channeled that accursed life again. Staked maidens sprung up around the edges of the room and blocked all escape. There were shrieks from the crowd I assume, the ones that had seen it last time.

I stepped up to the stage and dodged several green projectiles as some people started to chant from the audience.

"I need to clear up some misunderstandings that seemed to have developed here."

The founder went to speak and with a rough bone blade decapitated him to the horror of all.

I used soul steal and sat his head on the podium. "Now, I realize this 'trial' was probably going to work out in my favor and all this bureaucracy was going to lead to me becoming the headmaster. It was obvious from the start, but... I'm not your headmaster, inside me is the very same god that you all worship. Would you put your god on trial? Would you bid him to kill his friend and benefactor? If you did what do you think would happen?"

The black fire blazed under the maidens and they began crying out in ecstasy as their bodies burned.

The voices from the audience rang out like a jumbled mass of terrified children. "These necromancers today. No battle experience among you. Academics all, weak minded, weak willed. Like this, your no better than the people of that town. Despite your earlier bravery." I gave the founder's head a pat. "You're all cowering like rats in a forest fire. Now Barzealis, if you would, come up here."

He did as I asked and stood beside me, a cold sweat pouring down his face.

"This man here is your new headmaster. And as for killing Eunice, that was my right as your god. And any of you that supported here will join her soon enough. I have what I came here for, and I will fight for my people. If you join me I will fight for you as well but if you oppose me..."

I infused the founder's head with his soul. "Why don't you all use soul steal for a moment and ask him how he feels right now?"

Several hands lit up and quickly covered their ears.

I took his soul back, restored his head to his body and brought him back as he was. He gave me a bug-eyed stare and he backed away, like a man confronting a grizzly, unsure if he should run or play dead.

I returned to my seat and the darkness flooded back inside me.

I nodded to the founder. "Now that that misunderstanding is cleared up, you may resume."

For the first time I got a new sensation. Instead of pulling they were pushing through my connection. The room was silent except for those who wept. I had to make them understand that as much as I don't like it, this place is still held by the god of souls. I will snuff out all traces of him in their hearts. And if I want to do that, then it's better if they don't see me as a man. To them I need to be a god without question. I'll make them understand that, even if the road to that understanding is paved with fear.

"A-a-all In favor of Barzealis say aye!"

There was a few terrified ayes from the crowd.

"T-then this matter is closed, all may I-leave if John is okay with that."

"Aye."

They practically jumped over each other to get out as the other founder came to me.

She looked at me with scornful eyes. "All you had to do was wait and we would have given you everything."

"Tell me something, who did you worship in your time?"

"Uh, well--"

"That's what I thought, now you've met him and you put him on trial. On top of that imagine if he came here and found that almost everyone was worshipping a different god in secret. The two of you mistook my kindness for weakness and this is the result. You know who I am, you've seen what's inside me. I've been lenient here."

She began to shake. "T-thank you for your mercy!"

"Go, I'm sure he needs your support now."

She shakily walked up to the other founder and they left together. Barzealis still stood on the stage like a statue, his mouth agape and his skin sticky with sweat.

Ralphus ran up to him and he seemed to shake out of his stupor.

"The two of you should gather any necromancers who support me and meet me in the zombie room. Have them bring soul prisons with non-sentient souls and tell them I'll personally craft them zombies."

Ralphus agreed; Barzealis just stared off into space. I think these events today were beyond his expectations.

I returned to Dipshit's room and began to create clothing for the ones who didn't have it, like the handful of the cult of Rosereth people I brought back and the satyress who was probably offered clothes but refused. Come to think of it, Barzealis was wearing a red robe too when we first met, but now I didn't see anyone here in red robes. Could it be that Eunice didn't know that the cult of Rosereth wore them and changed things after she fought them?

When I was done, I met everyone in the zombie room. Ralphus was able to wrangle thirty necromancers, mostly the first years I brought back and probably some of their friends. The girl I had met when I jumped from the window and her suave zombie was also here.

I crafted thirty zombies and made them around eight feet high. They were brutes with muscles like steel cables and thick ichor for blood. Their flesh had no softness and their limbs felt like tree trunks. They wouldn't be fast, but they'd make great tanks, and as a final touch I added galvanism and had the students pick whichever one they thought was the prettiest.

I handed out the clothes to the ones that were hiding and began an hour long struggle to get a dress on the satyress. She fought hard and ahhed and oohed whenever I touched somewhere I shouldn't. To her it was all like some sort of game. Somehow I finally managed to convince her to keep her clothes on and was able to move on.

The plans by the imp strategist and the others seemed great. I wasn't able to remember everything but I got the gist of it.

I formed several balanced groups consisting of orcs, hobs and lizardmen as frontline units. Elves and dark-elves as archers/support and a single giant each. The beasts would be my personal unit and would serve as a distraction. The Kobolds and the gremlins would act as agents of chaos along with the assassins to strike in the night. They would destroy any food stores and kill any notable targets, all while setting traps around the area. They would sleep during the day, and we would sleep during the night, using the gate to the zombie room to avoid being caught unawares. Using these methods the enemy wouldn't be able to sleep or let their guard down and in time we would whittle them away. When the champion showed, Sid, Eva and the rest of the cult would carry out their plan and I would jump in if needed. All in all my confidence was boosted. Fighting an insurmountable force now seemed doable. All we had to do was follow the plan.

The only downside is that I could never leave the battlefield because I could only open the gate to my personal location as the pendant was the anchor.

Ralphus and I left through the front door. As we walked through the forest I stopped him.

"I'm sorry, man. It's now clear to them that I'm not one of them. It's also clear that you were in my corner the whole time. I can't thank you enough, I know you lost an entire life there."

"My life is with Lang and she's never been happier. I've also made friends with everyone and life is never boring in your town. Who would've thought that goblins have such a sense of humor. They laugh at all my jokes!" He chuckled.

It's true, they were quick to express joy these days. Just as they had been quick to anger before. I just wonder if I did the right thing with the necromancers. If they ever grew spines and decided to attack me... Well, actually they wouldn't make it too far. But if they ever play a card from the god of souls deck and bound someone I love's soul. No, I was in the right. The only way to root out that god's influence is with strong acts both good and terrible. If I'd played along, then they would have continued to worship the god of souls behind my back, fearing no repercussions from me.

It's strange, though, that I'm also able to feel his worshippers. It all reminds me of the conversation from the fight when he talked of splitting from the void. I think that ancient necromancers likely chose one aspect of the dark god and began treating it like a separate entity. Perhaps th--

"John! Hey!"

"Oh yeah, sorry about that. Yeah, I know what you mean. I love my gobs, I just hope the people catch up to them soon and drop all their biases and shallow thinking."

"So what's the plan once we get through the barrier?"

"I'll bring out Vesp and we can--"

"The damned wyvern!?"

"Yeah, he's actually an awesome person."

"P-person!? It's an army-destroying killing machine! My ancestors--"

"Yeah, he told me, but see things from his perspective. They hunted him in order to get him as a zombie. He's intelligent, he knew what they were up to and paid them back for their foolishness. They killed him in the end, so it's all water under the bridge now."

"Water under the... And you somehow believe he's not at all bitter about that?"

I laughed "Not as bitter as you, and you weren't even there. Besides, he's actually fairly forgiving. I accidentally, uh, consumed one of his wings and he forgave me."

"You bloody fool! Well, if he eats you don't come complaining to me."

"Oh, having an attitude now, huh? I wonder how Languoria will react when I tell her about the zombie-girl room."

Ralphus stopped dead in his tracks, his face turning pale. "Y-you wouldn't."

"I don't know..."

"Fine, you win, that damned bat-lizard is a freaking saint."

The sad part is, she might kill him anyway considering the amount of time we've been away... *My kids!! How could I forget about my kids! My babies, I haven't even seen them yet. No, what if it's been longer than I think and they've passed into the teen stage? I'd have missed all the cute moments and will be left with two more Athans.*

Ralphus and I walked on together, each our own shade of pale.

Chapter 24

We exited into the forest outside the barrier. The red robes of the cult were now just shreds, embedded in the ground. I looked into the trees on the other side and Threscia's webs were long gone. This didn't bode well.

Strangely there were no pulling sensations, so for the time being my town seemed fine.

I opened the gate to the zombie room and Fernando, the satyress, and the abomination leaped out at me.

Well, it's nice to know I'm loved.

"Stop humping me!!"

The abomination cocked its two heads and spoke in pheromones. "Is this an accepted form of greeting... Yesss!"

"Nooo!"

The cute satyress is one thing; being humped by the abomination is another thing entirely.

Fernando also responded. "You, little brother, you, bring John gifts, dead things, he likes."

"Yesss!"

"No, both of you, go back in... actually, I like, dead things, but, not right now. Oh, take the satyress with you."

Fernando gently grabbed the satyress with his fangs and walked back in; the abomination held its two longer arms together, touching fingertips and said "yesss" again.

I shouted through the gate, "Vesp! If you can hear me I have a favor to ask."

The crowd quickly cleared to make way for him. He walked through the gate and hissed as the daylight hit his eyes.

"Sorry about that, are you nocturnal?"

"Mostly, but thanks for asking about how my wing's doing. It's fine, thanks."

"Come on, man, I was asleep when that happened."

"That's fine, good old Vesp will just go die in some dark corner of the zombie room..."

A depressed Wyvern, really? "Give me a break here, I didn't do that intentionally... Wait a minute, I know what you're doing!"

He laughed a low, deep laugh. "I had you, though. You played right into it."

"Fine!" I laughed as well. "So, I can fly now, but you're better at it, and also I could use some conversation. What do you say, could I ride you?"

Ralphus gasped. "Oh void, no, I'm waiting in the zombie room!" He ran inside the gate and grabbed a cup of ale from the High King of the gnomes downing it in one gulp.

"Of course, you are my benefactor and friend. Besides, no one in there wants to play with me." He laughed again.

It's so refreshing not to be sexually harassed each time I ask to ride someone. Huh, that doesn't sound right.

It's true that with Mana Fill I could fly myself, but it would cost me dearly. To Vesp, flying is like walking.

I leaped, using my boots' hover ability at their peak, and was able to land on his lower neck. I bid the others in the zombie room goodbye for now and closed it as we took off.

We went high enough that for the first time, I could see this world. The forest was lush and in spots almost tropical. I noticed that it thinned the farther east we went. I was also able to see the rivers, forked and numerous, spread across the landscape like veins. The thickest spot was up north. That was the area that always caused so much trouble when going by land. To the south were mountains, and somewhere within them was that cave I started at so long ago. Fura's tree was still a landmark here, though even at this height I still couldn't see the top of it. Really, how many people did she kill? Well, with her body and tenacity, she may actually be the cause of several races' extinctions.

Though Vesp's overall speed was slower than Bob's, the fact he didn't have to weave around trees or obstacles made this the faster way to travel. The dips and leaps with every flap did, however, make me a little sick.

We talked telepathically about things that were different between this world and mine. I also told him about my town and my mates. He told me of his nest and the loss of his kin at the hands of infighting and dragons. I asked him what became of the dragons and he told me that there was a tale of their god taking them home.

It had parallels to the stories of the elves I had heard. This world had some sort of weird system in place. I shared my knowledge with him and we formed a theory. What if there was a god who, like a parasite, gradually ate another god from the inside? What was it Eunice called Theresa? The usurper. There was a moment of silence as we pondered it.

My map showed us getting closer, and on the ground I could see several tents. "There! That's probably the enemy."

We circled back until they were out of sight and landed.

I opened the gate again. This time I called everyone out except for the night ambush group.

"They are here! Our time is now; we fight, we die, but for every one slain we will need ten of their heads. Come, ye great warriors of the past, ye masters of warfare. We will show these churchboys what true strength is!"

There was a cheer mainly lead by the orcs. The giants bellowed, and even some of the elves joined in.

I formed my scouting unit and along with a handful of canine Kobolds we moved ahead.

The Kobolds skillfully sniffed out the way, and to my surprise traps had been set all throughout the forest, though these traps were small, designed to catch small game. We finally arrived at their camp and I looked it over.

Several white tents littered the landscape, anywhere there was a clearing large enough there was a tent. I saw

men eating, practising and generally goofing off.

This was the mighty crusade!? I was reminded of Thads's bandits. This didn't have the seriousness of a military camp, though; it seemed more like a tent city. Like these guys were trying their hand at camping for the first time.

We waited a few hours until dark and I snuck into the camp using dark armor and stalk. If nothing else, they still had numbers, and I wasn't about to risk an all-out assault without first finding a weakness.

I raised one of the corners of a closed tent and searched the inside. I found a set of white armor and put it on. Matching my body to its proportions. I was then able to walk the camp unnoticed.

I overheard a conversation that caught my ear and listened in.

"Yeah, fuck Theresa and fuck that champion of 'er's!"

"Ha, divine goddess of humanity my ass. If it weren't for that damn symbol of 'er's I'd be at home right now bangin' me wife!"

"Indeed! If it wasn't for that damn symbol I'd be at home now bangin' Garus's wife!"

"You'd be what!?"

"Nothing mate, cheers to Thadeus! Cheers to our freedom!"

"Aye aye, cheers to the champion and his corpse!"

They were surrounded by laughter as they drank deep.

Hmm, Thadeus... Thads. What did they mean by "And cheers to the champion's corpse"? It's a hard question to ask, but maybe...

I walked out around the tent and stumbled as if I couldn't find my footing. "Oy, you lot, what'sis bout a champion's corpse and Thadeus?"

"What, mate, are you that battered? This guy's forgotten everythin'! Someone grab 'is mug."

I sat down and smiled stupidly at them.

"Oy, he's off 'is rocker, int he?"

"Ah, who cares, listen here, mate. We owe a lot to that twat; we was bound by the sigil to obey' im jus' 'cause we believed in the same god. Surely you didna come willing, didja?"

Oh shit, their speech has gotten worse. Now I have to figure out how to talk drunk Therossian. "Na mate, I jus' canna remember everythin'!"

"Ha, yer talkin funny. Yer right legless. Nah, we was bound by that sigil, you too, uh." He looked along my breastplate until he found a symbol. "Garus... Oy, we got the same name!"

"And the same wife!" another man shouted.

"Oy, my wife's an angel. She's been mine an' mine alone ever since I bought 'er from that 'ore house."

"Ore, was she a miner?"

"Nah'uh, she's of age."

Laughter rang out.

"So anyway... What were we talking about?"

"Your wife!" someone called out.

Oh great, this conversation is now going in a drunken circle.

I ended up steering things back around, but all I got for my troubles were more puns. Finally as their cups emptied I was able to ask questions more directly without fear of discovery.

I got a description of Thadeus; it matched my memories of Thads right down to the detail of missing a leg. I also got a crude description of what happened. Apparently most members of the crusade had been controlled by what they called the sigil or the symbol. It was some sort of artifact that enabled the champion to control them through their shared faith in the same bullshit goddess.

Around two weeks ago, the sigil lost its power over them and Thadeus killed the champion in his sleep and displayed his corpse. After that he rallied more than half the army and even killed the high priest in some grand display. The

crusade fell apart and half went back towards the capital to fight against someone who took the throne; the other half continued south to loot villages. After that they broke into smaller groups like this one and became bandits, for lack of a better term.

With dread in my heart I asked if there was a place I could get laid and was pointed to a tent.

Inside I found several nude women, most near catatonic from the constant abuse. All were human, so I knew the bandits hadn't breached my village yet. But their proximity, like their deeds, couldn't be ignored.

I returned to my unit and brought forth the Kobolds, gremlins and lizardman assassins. They set about their work with gruesome efficiency. We finished with a full-on assault, but with all their commanding officers dead, they didn't put up much of a fight. Together we had killed them all before daybreak.

I was still saddened to know that this was just one of many cells that had broken off from the now failed crusade. I didn't even care to turn them to torches. I simply freed the women and followed the breadcrumbs to the surrounding villages.

Is humanity with Theresa any better than humanity without her? I couldn't tell. It's all bad. I want nothing more than to wash my hands of it, but my lifetime spent as Giles told me that my world was nothing better. A change of scenery and few hundred years, that was all.

We continued to decimate the bandit population as we moved forward inch by bloody inch. It turns out that the mass of tents wasn't even a tenth of what the crusade originally was.

We sprayed the ground with their blood in hopes that new flowers would bloom, but not all shit makes good fertilizer.

We plowed forward like thieves in the night, until we came across a group that actually seemed to be military

trained. They caught me quick; Garus's armor was now stained with human blood and they were able to sniff it out. I ended up having to retreat, leaving only my knock-out fog as a going away present.

They fought hard, their paladins taking our infantry head on. They had high defense and healing to spare. But they had no defence against a basilisk's stone spray or a manticores's poison. We had broken through their front lines even before the archer's arrows or the infantry's swords had found their marks. Beset from two fronts they had nothing to do but die. We pressed forward and they bled for us. I had raised the largest nonhuman army this continent had seen and with the strategist's help used it to its full extent.

I waded my way through all these hollow victories. As my sadness grew, all I could think about was home. My mates, my children.

How long now have we been fighting these guys? Weeks? Months? The hinges on my boots were rusting from all the blood we shed. We crushed these humans, slaughtering them wholesale, but there's no end to them. Like cockroaches feeding on the filth of the world.

I sat by one of their fires as my men celebrated in the background. I turned to ale for comfort. This is not what I wanted but this had to happen. It's strange, I haven't encountered any strong magic users or clerics. The paladins were the only ones to put up a good fight so far, but their magic was all self-healing and self-buffs. Surely the crusade didn't think raw muscle would be enough to take us down. And so, this thought keeps me from sleep. This worry spurs me forward. I can only hope that everyone is fine for now and that the group that split will stay in the capital.

After emptying their stocks of ale I fell into a drunken sleep. I'm so close to home, yet how can I return when danger lurks everywhere around it? If they were to reform, then we might be in trouble. My thoughts ebbed away and finally I found peace.

The next day we came across a bloody battlefield, this time not of our making.

White tents now red, men now months dead lay in their golden armor. One body in fetid gold robes was quartered. Its head was missing, taken as a trophy perhaps?

On a wooden platform I found another who was made into an example. An impaled torso, his genitals missing, only to be found in his mouth. Around his neck hung a bloody gold symbol.

Ralphus walked up to me. "Wow, someone must have really hated this guy."

"Ah, Ralphus, meet the champion. Champion, meet Ralphus, oh, my apologies, please, don't speak with your mouth full." I laughed, though my laughter died in my throat.

Ralphus patted me on the back. "That's dark, even for you. You don't look so well."

"I'm fine; my life is nothing but blood now. That and death. When did taking a life become such an empty act, I wonder?"

Ralphus looked at me with sad eyes, then left the platform.

I no longer checked the number of souls that I got during a battle, but the last time I looked it was around 800. I converted the first camp to mana, but after that they've just been stacking up in there. Should I make them blank slates? Give them another chance at life? No, their bodies lie in the stomachs of my men and their acts are still unforgivable; they pillaged, they raped. But so did the orcs, so did the Garanthi, and so did my gobs at one point. Then again they all did it to survive. These guys could have just laid down their arms and went home to plow their fields.

"Is that the fucker?" Sid eyed the torso.

I sighed. "Oh great, my favorite person is here."

Sid looked out among the men. "Hey, red witch of the west, get your ass up here!"

Eva came sauntering gracefully between the men until she stopped dead. Her eyes fixed on the champion's corpse.

That's right, no martyrdom for you. In fact, of the two of you, right now he's the one crucified. Now all she could do is live with herself, knowing it was all pointless.

Sid ran down and the two of them came to look at the champion's corpse.

She cried, tears staining her perfect face. "This was supposed to be my—"

"Your way to justify killing those that trusted you? To die without having to deal with your actions? No, this is your end result. All you accomplished was bringing this wife-killing asshole to this world and bewitching him. I hope the two of you are happy with each other, because now that's all you got."

It's strange that right now the only one crying for the champion is the woman who wanted to kill him.

I used soul steal on the champion and opened up the soul screen.

He stood before me doing little else but blinking at the others.

I separated him into his own space and conjured a chair.

He sat hard and looked himself over. "I-I'm dead aren't I?"

I opened my eyes and showed him his corpse. "I want you to tell me everything you know about Thadeus."

"Brother Thadeus? He's a charming lad, one of Theresa's faithful and beloved by Barneth."

I walked over to the quartered body and the champion gasped.

"This was the other one that was made into some sort of example. Who was he?"

The champion fell to his knees and began praying. I picked him back up and sat him back in the chair. "Who was he?"

"...High Priest Barneth. May he frolic forever in Theresa's garden."

"Theressa is a fake. She's some sort of parasitic god that was killing Rossereth. Though in all likelihood, Rossereth is but one of many she's eaten from the inside out."

With a battle cry, he rushed me, his spectral hands trying to grab me. I shoved him down and conjured chains from the darkness to lock him in place.

He looked up at me with hate in his eyes. "I will not allow you to speak ill of my goddess! I have given all for her, my name, my family—"

"Your honor, your intelligence, your freedom. Yes, you chose poorly. I've seen your goddess's realm; it was hollow, lifeless, false and built on top of another. She has no garden. You've probably been dead for months and I walked right up and took your soul from your stinking corpse. I didn't wrestle it away from her, in fact..."

I brought up the 800+ souls bound inside spectral coffins. I opened them all at once and freed the champion to look at them.

"These men should be familiar to you; you bound them into military service against their will."

"T-these fine young men are...dead!? You're a—"

"A monster? A devil? A murderer? I've heard it all before, and after seeing who I once was, you may be right. But they became much worse than me. They pillaged, murdered, and raped because of you." With that I slammed the coffins shut and threw them back into the darkness.

I'm not angry with him for some reason. His face shows pure shock. It's a form of honesty that can't be conveyed through words. I think the champion may have simply been a self-deluded fool, acting on orders.

"How could they have... And Thadeus? He killed me?"

"Think back, the signs are usually there. You were just a puppet weren't you? Blinded by faith and lead gently by Thad's hand straight into the meat grinder."

I played him the memories of my mates and my people. Laughing, happy, helping each other. "These are the people

she wanted you to kill. My wives, my friends, my daughters."

I played him the memories of Thad's camp, the girls who became my daughters and their states in that place. "These are Thadeus's victims. Oh, I'm sorry, 'Brother Thadeus.'"

Tears flowed from his eyes as he watched.

I showed him my talk with the Garanthi general who became Red. He talked about how Thads killed him in his sleep. "This 'brother' was by your side. Like a spider he made a web and like a fly you were trapped. Just another victim."

"I-I—" He stammered and I cut him off. "Just shut the hell up. I've got more to show you."

I showed him Theresa's white realm and hollow sun, when the ground finally gave way and how Rossereth destroyed it when she broke free.

"That was Theresa's realm. Empty, like her."

He shook, pounding his fists on the non-existent floor. "What have I lived for? Please! What can I do to make things right?"

I frowned. "Nothing, you're dead."

I conjured another coffin and bound him inside, then flung him into the darkness to join the others.

I might bring him back without his memories. But for now, I'll let him be alone with his thoughts. I'm not hurting for manpower.

I walked past Sid and Eva and rejoined Ralphus. "When we leave here, let's burn this place to the ground. Something about it sickens me."

I called out to Darionus to take Theresa's sigil to the reliquary and had some of the hobgobs take the gold armor to be smelted down and given to the dark academy in exchange for food.

Really, gold armor? Gold is soft and heavy, only an idiot would take something like that into battle. I can only assume the others left it because it would be hard to pawn.

The dwarven blacksmith had already used some relics and with the help of Kalapract and the engineer had built a small yet powerful forge. Steadily, my men had gotten better equipment, both directly from the fallen and from them, so smelting some gold should be trivial.

The elves had even received compact bows, and the dwarves, though few in number, now sported crossbows that were almost the same height as them, though they rarely got the chance to use them.

I retired to an empty tent, and as I sat, I fought the urge to return home. Sure, my villagers are not weak, but my army is strong, and though I hate to admit it, I wouldn't be as saddened if a few of them died.

Though I do wonder why I haven't seen any town scouts yet. Given the circumstances, I can only guess they retreated into Fura's warren and continued living underground as I had asked them to. Have my children never seen the sky?

Either way there's no pulling sensations. So for now I can consider them safe. All I need to do to see them is to clear this filth from our borders. Then they can come back out.

But jeez. I laughed to myself. That means they're locked in a tight dark place with Bob; I bet Leera's at wits end.

There was a loud noise as the ground shook. I ran outside to see a massive white mushroom cloud in the distance—just north of my town.

My blood pumped, my stomach sank, and I ran. A sudden pulling sensation hit me, but instead of desperation I felt...bliss coming through it.

A second explosion rocked us all as my men frantically scattered. I opened the gate and yelled for them all to get through it!

As everyone poured in I watched as the second cloud overtook the first one. Its color was a sickly brown, dotted with red and green specks. It consumed the first cloud and a foul wind hit us. I gagged and went into undead mode as

something began raining down. I dived into the gate and closed it.

Now back at the dark academy, I used the pendant to warp to the reliquary. I ran up the stairs to Eunice's quarters and looked outside. Through the barrier I could see the clouds changing into that same sickly brown. It rained, but none of fell through the barrier.

I watched for hours until the clouds returned to a mostly normal color before I made my way to the courtyard. The students were in an uproar and the faculty that stayed were, trying to corral them indoors.

I exited the front and walked through the forest until I was standing at the edge of the barrier. The trees outside were all dead most of their limbs and leaves had fallen and now coated the ground. I stepped outside.

Hard raindrops pelted my skin and I held out my hand... "Maggots!"

It's raining maggots!? They quickly began burrowing into me and I leaped back through the barrier. I used blend and absorbed them.

It's suicide to go out there right now.

I don't know what those are, but they eat flesh and mana with a vicious appetite. I returned to the Academy and told them to stay within the barrier no matter what.

I next told everyone in the zombie room what I saw. The composite I'd made out of heroes and a death cultist that had remained silent until this moment laughed.

We all fell silent as we stared at him. His laughter finally broke. "For those who seek a better day, welcome to tomorrow. This is the death of flesh, Obitus's blessing is upon us! Come, let us dive into the maw of god!"

I restrained him as he fought to go up the stairs. "You fool, if you go out there right now, you're dead! Beyond what I can fix, even your soul will be consumed by those things."

Shit! My town!

I used the calming effect. *No, they'll be safe. There is no further pull—No! I can't feel them from inside the barrier!*

I threw him down and had my men hold him as I once again ran to the barrier's edge. I tore a leafy branch from a tree and held it over my head as I stepped through. The vermin burrowed into me but I focused on my town. I felt minor pulling sensations and fear, but it was fear from uncertainty, not mortal danger. They were probably wondering what was happening outside.

I could feel Fura's determination; she must be working hard to keep those things from getting in, though I don't think they can eat through that pseudo-rock that covers the warren.

They were already struggling with the wood on the branch I held. It seems like they are getting weaker.

I sighed in relief and walked back in. I used blend and found a nice dark place in the zombie room to lie down.

"Nothing to do but stay indoors! Get some R&R everybody; tomorrow we return to the grind."

I lay there, my thoughts focused on my people as a furry body nestled up to me. There was a slight impact as she hit me with her horns. I can guess who this is. I rolled over on top of her and undid my pants. She moaned softly as I pushed myself inside her. It had been too long; I needed to think about something else.

I looked down at her smiling face as she pulled me farther inside her with her legs. "I'm sorry for using you like this, but I need this, and I know you want me."

She pulled me down with her arms and as my second twin touched her rear entrance she stopped with a gasp.

"Oh, that's right. I have two, so I'll need to get you ready first." She blushed as excitement showed in her eyes.

"Can you speak? You need to tell me when you feel good or when something hurts."

She shyly nodded. "I can speak! And if you're the one doing it, it all feels good!" She smiled at me and I kissed her.

She jerked her head back and stared at me.

"Ah, right, kisses are a human thing. Open your mouth a little and let your tongue play with mine."

There was a clap. "Oh, for void's sake man, this isn't Riverbrook. We're not goblins!" Ralphus said as the hobs and goblins looked at him. "Er, most of us are not goblins. Either way, take this to Eunice's quarters!"

I waved him off as I plunged one twin deep, the other running along behind her. She cried out in a cute voice and I couldn't hold back any more.

An audience gathered, mostly hobs, gobs and orcs. There were females amongst them and soon they began pairing off into their own groups, leaving only the smirking dark elves and the flabbergasted high elves who despite their expressions watched with rapt fascination.

The other races with tribal backgrounds joined in and the dwarves took whichever females were available. *Let's hope that's not just because of beer goggles, or things will be awkward tomorrow.*

As moans filled the background I began to feel frustrated that my other twin was just waving in the wind.

I looked at the elves who were so uncomfortable it was painful. In the back I saw the wavy platinum hair of the woman who said she accepted my proposal.

If it was too early to bury both twins in the satyress, then I needed another.

I kissed the satyress again deeply as she bucked her hot body against me. "I'll be right back, I'm going to invite someone else."

She frowned as she pulled me closer. "No! Don't pull out!"

"Then hold on tight." I stood and supported her weight with one arm as she continued to arch herself against me. I walked through the mass of traumatized elves and took Thia's hand.

Her skin had turned a deep shade of crimson as she stared at me wide-eyed. "W-w-what a-a-are you doing?!"

"You accepted my proposal, did you not know what that meant? What I'm doing now is the same as a marriage ceremony among my people. It means I'm claiming you in front of everyone so all know we are linked and that you are mine."

She began to pant, letting out long, hot breaths as she imagined it. Her eyes slowly moved down my body, then to her people who all stood with expressions of shock.

The satyress moaned again as she slid down me a little lower and I went deeper inside her.

"Come, princess, let's show them your cute face when I enter you, your naked body as I pump you and your expression as you finish in the height of ecstasy. They're your people; show them you want me."

She swallowed hard, her lips slightly parted as she moved a shaking hand to try to untie the binds of her dress.

I ripped the dress off. I could fix it later. She let out a small squeal as I pulled her close and kissed her. I held her tight, pressing her against us. Her soft white skin was now red and flushed. She shook in my arms and I licked along her ears, causing her to moan. She pulled back and looked at me with surprise.

"Yes, I know how to make you feel good. Don't be too surprised." She kissed me again, this time harder and we all lay down.

The satyress let out another loud moan as her wetness ran down my legs. I pulled out even though she complained and kissed her. "Deal with it for a while, I know you just finished, but I promise we're not done."

I kissed Thia then moved slowly down her neck, licking each patch of tender skin along her body until I was above her mound. I could hear her breathing and looked up to see the satyress kissing her. She protested for a moment but as I began to use my tongue she gave in.

I licked slowly at first, getting faster and making sure to get her wet enough. I gently inserted my finger as I kissed along both thighs and found resistance.

She was tight, even on my finger, and the thought of putting myself inside her made the twins throb.

The satyress straddled her and I gave her the same treatment, kissing and licking her as I used my fingers on both of them. They moaned between kissing and I knew they were ready.

I positioned myself at both of their entrances and looked at her elves. They stood in awkward positions, obviously aroused.

"Look close, your princess is about to lose her virginity. Watch her face and I press in slowly. And you, my princess, give them a good show." I pushed myself into both of them slowly as the princess moaned deep, then bucked slightly as I tore through her barrier.

I kept pushing until I was against both their inner gates. I yanked the satyress back, piercing through them as she arched her back, tears forming in her eyes, her mouth open. I pulled her back and kissed her as I began to thrust into them both. Thia covered her face with her hands and bit her lip as if trying to silence her moans. I pulled her close slowly, tapping her depths, and she made little high-pitched noises each time.

"Don't hide yourself, you're far too beautiful to cover your face. I've taken you, all of you, so show me how you feel."

She slowly uncovered herself and looked at me with misty eyes, her hands in little fists below her neck. "Look, they're all watching as I mate with the both of you. They're dreaming of what you feel like inside. Wishing they could ravish you, but knowing they never can. You're mine now, moan for me!"

I felt her tighten at my words and soon she was so wet that it was hard to believe it was her first time. The satyress

began bucking against me faster and I gave her ass a slap causing her to clench down.

I felt myself getting closer. "Empty your minds; the rest of the world doesn't matter now. All I want from you is to give yourself to pleasure. Feel it build within you with each breath, slowly getting stronger. Then let me feel you while you come."

They both tightened and I began slamming into them. I could feel my twins bottoming out with each thrust as they both cried out in pleasure and pain. The satyress thrust herself back one final time and began shaking. Thia reached up and pulled her down, hugging her close as her legs began to shake in my hands.

I felt the satyress's muscles twitching around me as she came. The sensation built up until I couldn't take it anymore. I slammed deep and released everything I had into them.

I continued making small thrusts into them as the pressure built inside. Thia moaned as she hugged herself to the satyress and I finally felt her begin to clench me. My orgasm felt like it lasted for minutes, and even after theirs stopped I continued to pump my seed into them. Finally, exhausted, I pulled out and watched.

"No, don't look!" Thia said as my seed leaked out in large spurts onto the floor. The satyress moaned and held herself open with both hands as she did the same.

We lay there in the wetness for a while as Thia looked at me. The satyress got her third wind quickly and began to grind herself on Thia's knee. I kissed her then moved her down my body until she was eye level with the twins.

I smiled as I looked down at her. "Clean them with your tongue, then clean Thia. Afterwards the princess will return the favor."

The satyress got to work, amateurish but with great enthusiasm, while I pulled Thia onto my chest.

We stared into each other's eye until she looked away. "I can't believe I—"

"Don't look away from me." I cupped her face and brought it around to mine. I kissed her soft lips and rubbed her ears, causing her to moan into my mouth. I pulled back and looked into her light blue, almost purple eyes. She was in total bliss as I continued to rub her ears. "You're adorable, you know. But we're together now, never look away from me. Never be afraid to show me how you feel. Though I know we may not be in love, love is something that comes in time. Until then let's take pleasure in each other's company and enjoy everything we have to offer one another. All I ask of you is honesty and loyalty. Nothing more."

She blushed softly. "W-what about her?" She pointed down to the satyress who smiled back up at us while running her tongue up a twin. A shiver went up my spine and I lost my train of thought for a moment.

"She's already honest, and after this I know she'll be loyal. Besides," I gestured to her and pulled her up to lay on my chest opposite Thia. I looked into her eyes and she stared back a large grin slowly forming on her face. "She's definitely in love and although I'm not there yet, I'll cherish her all the same." I smiled back down at her and she giggled.

She's dangerous in her own way. A girl this cute with this kind of libido and this much aggression? It was never *if* she would become my mate, it was always *when*.

I slowly looked at her, taking in everything. She had short, shaggy hair tucked behind her swept-back horns. Large brown eyes and a pixieish physique, all except for her breasts which were probably a C. Definitely like holding oranges, except infinitely softer. Her thighs had depth but not width, and her fur went from her hooves to right above her knee.

Yep, definitely a when.

I kissed her on the forehead and she nuzzled her face against me.

I turned to Thia, who still gazed at me. She was an ethereal beauty—the sort of woman that you might mistake for a goddess in elven form. Platinum blonde hair, wavy in places from where she'd been keeping it braided for battle. A lithe frame except for her hips, which were wide. She had long, slender legs and soft features that made you want to take care of her. The outer corner of her eyes slanted down slightly giving her a kind, almost sleepy expression most of the time. This is another woman who's easy to fall for.

She reached over and began smoothing down the satyress's hair. "Well, if she's also our mate then we should name her."

There was an outcall from the elves that surrounded us. "You can't be serious, your highness. To take a satyress of all things as a mate!"

The man fell silent as a fist struck him dead in the jaw. A familiar, oddly feminine elf stood there with an unnatural frown on his face. "My sister is free to do as she wishes! You'll let her love whomever she wants! Right, sis?" He smiled.

Well, this is wierd, I kinda forgot about everyone else just hanging around here.

She smiled back at him. "Right, Telik!"

I gestured for the kid to move right; he looked at me with confusion but eventually did it. I kept gesturing until he was well away from the others and used Dark Tendrils on them. Well, if they're not mating then tentacles it is. Well, not really, but it will keep them occupied for a moment or two. Telik and Thia laughed as I gave Thia and the satyress a squeez.

"Don't worry, they'll be fine in an hour or so. I don't think I put any feeling in that one."

A faint moan escaped an elf. "Ahh, it's so slimy."

Another one from a different direction. "Noo, it's touching my... Ahn!"

"Uh, right, maybe some feeling did get put into it. Well, they should still be okay."

It's probably a welcomed feeling after watching what they just did. *Oh god, I hope Bob never uses this spell; given what feelings lie inside him the results would be disastrous.*

I got poked in the cheek and looked down to see Thia making a pouty face at me. "And you just told me not to look away."

I poked her puffed out cheek back. "That was different. So," *I hate that I'm about to say this*, "let's name her."

Her eyes lit up as she spoke. "How about Fauna!"

"No, that's too close to another mate of mine's name."

Her eyes went wide. "...Another!?"

"Yes, I have Leera, Lina, Nex, L..." I closed my eyes. *Now's not the time...*

Thia wiped my face again. "You don't have to talk to me about it yet. But someday I hope you'll tell me about her."

I nodded and held her close. Her hair smelled like sunlight and...blood. We've fought too many battles. It's only been a short while, but is that really all the interaction I've had with anyone? Planning, assassinating and head-on, face-to-face slaughter. I looked down and parts of her hair were red or brown. *That's it, after this I'm finding out if the academy has a bath.*

I sighed. *Let's see she's a goat girl. Goatsey, No! Soo much no! God, that sounds too much like a bad google search. I am terrible at this... Hecate, no, let's not name someone after a goddess from another world who knows what shit that'd start. Hecate... he, cate. Fuck it, Katie sounds cute, she's cute, it's a normal name. So Katie it is.*

I looked down to the satyress. "How do you feel about being called Katie?"

She moved up and kissed me followed by Thia who, now that she wasn't turned on, responded with a help-me expression.

I laughed. "So, you like your name?"

"Yes!"

Thia smiled and kissed my cheek. "Her happiness is contagious."

"Yes, for the first time in what may be months, I feel better."

I picked up Thia's dress and gave it some temporary mending to keep it together, then looked around for Katie's panties but no luck. Given her character, she probably removed them right after I finally got her to wear them and tossed them away somewhere in rebellion.

"Come on, you two, we're going to find a bath!"

I took both their hands and we walked up the stairs together.

Chapter 25

I spent the rest of that day with the both of them exploring each other's bodies and getting to know them. However my mind was still focused on my town. Today hopefully the maggot rain has cleared and we can finally move on.

I got up from Eunice's bed. In my frantic state of mind I noticed something that I'd missed before. One of her dead flesh golems looked like me. Not as tall, but in the dark it could fool someone. This must be how she got Liz. *Eunice, you got off way too easily!*

I had to use the calming effect two more times before the thoughts went away, but I couldn't help but see the events in my mind. Liz, seeing this guy, dropped her guard and let him close. After that he probably knocked her out and dragged her in. She died because she trusted me.

I used the calming effect again. No one chimed in to warn me. No one to stop me from doing something stupid.

I laughed bitterly. *Damnit, Mors! You were the only one who I never expected could leave me. But no, sucked in and rewritten by the book. Part of me is gone, probably the good part.*

Mors, your efforts paid off. The souls inside me no longer fight against me. They support me now as you did. But I'll always feel that something's missing now. Like I'm truly alone.

I felt a dark embrace but no words came.

Thank you. I get it, for better or worse, neither of us will be alone again. I thought back to old France. The dark god always finds me when I'm at my lowest. He did the same in my final moments of my last life as well. How long has he been trying to reach me, and is it right to call him a he? It's

just darkness, now given a will, an ego, at long last. It soaks in and wallows in others' suffering, it feeds on dark emotions, yet it seems happy when I'm happy. It fawns over its followers no matter who they are. If it consumed the god of souls, would its personality change?

I kissed Thia and woke her up. Katie leaped on top of us and we rolled around for a while until I tickled her into submission.

"Let's get ready, we have a long day ahead of us."

I walked with them through the necromancer's halls. I wanted to make sure everything was fine after that stunt I pulled and Barzealis's promotion.

I still felt some of the corrupted bonds, meaning that the god of souls still had a foothold here, but there were now many more direct bonds to me as well.

Hopefully in time this place will be cleansed of that cackling bastard.

I parted ways with the two of them at the zombie room and made my way outside, to the edge of the barrier.

I peeked through it, and things looked normal, destroyed but normal.

When I stepped through I saw how wrong I was.

The ground was littered with the skeletal remains of various animals. The few that weren't skeletons looked abnormal. I got a long stick and poked what I could only guess was a large gopher. Its skin poked back.

I see where this is going and I'm not going there.

I moved several yards back and shot off a small dark blade. As it cut into it, the gopher exploded. And several large glowing flies shot out. I dived back through the barrier and observed them as they returned to their gopher home and began to feed.

This reeks of Thrall.

That blissful feeling that came over the link could only have been from him as well as the fragrant disregard for life this spell caused. This area may not be livable anymore. It's

filled with dead animals and what I'm going to call plague flies; it even killed the trees and plants. There's no way a creature can live here. It's a wasteland now.

My town wasn't under a barrier; I can only imagine what I'll be returning to.

I opened the gateway to the zombie room and asked for any powerful casters with AOE's. I then had to explain what an AOE was. From the ones that came forth I picked a handful of dark elves and the Kobold called Flame Tongue.

Best not to involve too many with the nature of death magic. It could become an epidemic.

We cautiously stepped through the barrier and the Flame Tongue breathed fire onto the gopher, killing the flies. The dark elves cast a dark barrier over us not dissimilar to what the dark academy had. It makes me wonder, did KalapRACT have anything to do with the academy's barrier?

We made steady progress, burning a direct path to my town and I used mana transfer to replenish Flame Tongue whenever he ran low. This was going to take ages and likely not accomplish anything more than showing everyone both where the dark academy is and where my town is. So I opened the gate and sent the rest back. I called for Vesp and he batwalked through. If he wasn't so damn terrifying I would laugh every time I saw him do his little waddle-crawl.

He looked around. "This is horrible. This land is barren now. Come, we'll have a look from up high."

I leaped on and we flew over everything. I could see large patches of the glowing plague flies like low-hanging clouds. All things green had turned gray, and where grass once grew, there was only dirt.

Spells like this are probably why deathmagic is taboo and death cults are snuffed out soon after they form.

We arrived at the area we last stopped at and I saw the camps of the battles we never fought. At least that part's done with, but this is no place for my people, no home for my children.

I had Vesp land near the river. Its waters had a greasy film over them that shone many different colors in the sunlight. I produced a snakevine and ordered it to take a drink. It shriveled as soon as it touched the water. Let's hope they still have some water in Fura's warren, though the underground wells will likely still be okay for a while.

We flew north of Riverbrook, to the place both of those blasts erupted from. There was a crater, and the trees all along it were laid down facing away. In its center I saw the bony remains of Thrall, scattered yet still recognizable, a hand here, a leg there. And on the other side, white robes and gold breastplates clung to the skeletal remains of men. The area was still blanketed by thick clouds of plague flies.

Those were probably the spellcasters and clerics, there may be more than a thousand of them here. That can't be all of them though. Why was Thrall not in the warren, and why did these guys come back? We circled the area for a while looking for any signs of others but found none.

By the lack of tents I can tell these guys were marching.

"Vesp, is there anything you can do about the plague flies?"

"One thing; you may want to remove your eardrums."

I did as he said and he unleashed a roar so loud his body vibrated. Within moments the clouds of flies peppered the ground, their bodies no longer glowing.

We landed and I attempted to use soul steal on Thrall. Nothing came. It's good you were happy at the end, my friend. I picked up his head. His skull looked like he was grinning. Your magic was as reckless as ever, but there must have been a reason for it.

I searched among the shredded robes and through the dented breastplates. I found a fragment of paper. But it was too torn and stained to read. I'm guessing these guys were here on some order. Maybe they didn't know the crusade ended.

But that white flash must have been from them. It's crazy to think that one of these guys had a power like that. Thrall must have really pushed them into a corner, as that spell seemed like it was dangerous to the caster as well.

I opened the gate and called out some men to take the breastplates inside. More gold for the necromancers. But I doubt anyone will bring supplies now. That spell probably wiped out all the villages around. And even if a few did manage to survive, as soon as they drink that water they're gone. No more fishing, no hunting, no herbs or vegetables. This place will probably be filled with unbound undead in a few hundred years or so.

After everything salvageable had been gathered I had them take in a few dead flies for the necromancers to study. Maybe they can learn some ways to get rid of them all at once.

I leaped back on Vesp and we headed for Riverbrook.

Most of the houses were destroyed by the twin blasts. The ones that weren't were in no condition to live in.

I searched through everything and other than one familiar snake-shaped skeleton I found no remains.

I walked back to where Fura had been proudly making her garden and all was dead. I looked around for some entrance to the warren.

After a few minutes of pacing the ground opened up and a staircase formed. Radiant red hair and a pair of orange eyes peeked out, followed quickly by the rest of her.

"John!"

She ran and I caught her in an embrace. She kissed me as I held her. "It's nice to see you too, Fura."

"Come qu—" She stopped dead and stared up at Vesp. Her knees buckled for a second as she screamed.

"It's okay, he's a friend."

Her speech slipped back into forrestkin as she said a hundred different things at once.

I held her close again and kissed her until she relaxed enough to try English again.

"Was he what we heard yesterday?"

"No, that was Thrall and some sort of powerful magic user. Look around, we'll have to move soon."

Her face turned dark as she saw her ruined garden.

I opened the gate and asked Vesp to go back for now. As he went back in I called out Ralphus and Fernando.

"Could it be?" An old familiar voice came out of the hole as Reginauld peeked his head out. He yelled something inside and one by one, my people came to greet me.

I saw Nex, tears streaming down her face. She held the hand of a beautiful grayish-green toddler. It really has been a while—she's already walking.

I felt my tears flow as well as I met them. I scooped her up in my arms and she giggled and said something in goblin.

I looked at Nex who was brimming with joy. "Is this our daughter?"

"Yes, I've to—"

I kissed her and held them both close for several minutes. I stared into my daughter's amber eyes and she smiled at me. "Do you know who I am?"

"Poppa!" she said with a big grin.

I hugged her close. "I'm sorry, the tears won't stop. Poppa's wanted to see you so bad!"

I've never felt so overwhelmed before. To hold someone so precious in your arms someone that you made. It's truly beautiful.

Nex kissed me again, we stared into each other's eyes for a while. "I named her Aneeza. I tried to use the sounds of your language."

"That's a beautiful name. I love you both so much."

"Yay, Poppa loves me!"

Nex just smiled as she gently took Aneeza from my arms. "Let's go stand with Grampa, There's someone else who

wants to meet Poppa."

Aneeza frowned and threw a little tantrum. Nex fussed at her in goblin and Aneeza looked at me for help.

"Sorry, sweetie, listen to mommy, it's easier that way."

She tilted her head as Nex dragged her away. I watched them, unable to peel my eyes away. I can't believe it. I'm a father, and that's my child. It all seems so surreal.

I felt a small tug on my pants and saw Lina holding a baby, roughly half her size. I fell to my knees and looked at him.

"His name is Slater, after your last name." I kissed her and him on the forehead.

"My son! I don't even care if your name is Slater Slater now. Mommy didn't know, so don't blame her later."

Lina's brows knit as I gently took him in my arms.

This is my boy; he had thick white hair and light gray skin like his mother. I unwrapped him a little as he cooed up at me. He held out his little hand and grabbed my finger.

Ah, I'm crying again now.

He opened his little eyes, and they were radiant gold. My amber and Lina's green made such a beautiful shade. He started crying, but I couldn't stop smiling. I never knew a person could mean so much to me when I'd only just met them.

"Shh, shh now, I know daddy's ugly but don't worry, you'll be a handsome boy someday!"

I sat there in the dirt and held him, making silly faces until he started laughing. Lina sat in my lap and we shared a look. She blushed slightly as she spoke. "You don't know how much I wanted this. Since the first day I realized that I loved you and now," she stopped to dry her eyes, "now we have a baby. I love you John!"

I leaned down and we shared a long kiss. "I love you too. I love you both. And I'll dedicate my life to making sure Slater knows how much he's loved."

I felt a little flap under the blanket he was wrapped in. "Oh, is that why you're crying?"

I pulled off the blanket and he spread his wings. Already twice as long as his mother's. His legs seemed normal, but his feet were talons. He also noticeably got one of my other traits—one that I wished I didn't pass on.

"When you get older, Daddy'll make you your first pair of normal guy pants."

He laughed and shot out a bone spike. "No, no, that's dangerous. Daddy knows it's fun, but never point it at people."

"Gahh!"

"That's right, not unless they deserve it."

"Plergh?"

"No, Bob's fine, you can stab Bob."

"Gorough!"

"Yeah, aim for the eyes."

A large bestial face with a sharptoothed grin came into sight. "What're ya teachin' tha kid?"

"Ah, speak of the devil. Nothing, he just says he wants to give you a hug. Just lean on down here."

Bob looked between me and Slater then leaned down.

"Gahh!"

"My friggin, mother-lovin eye!"

"That's my boy! Yes he is!"

"Dah!"

"Yes, victory!"

He giggled and cooed. Ah, babies are so pure.

Lina looked at me with a troubled expression as I mended Bob. "It's okay just this once, right?"

"Plergh?"

Lina laughed. "Okay, just this once!"

"Why're ya sharing some kinda of touchin' moment 'ere? Yer lil' hellion just stabbed me!"

"Ah, you'll live, besides, doesn't he kinda remind you of your first form?"

Bob smiled and walked off saying fake curse words.

Ha, he really isn't a bad guy.

"Wave goodbye to uncle Bob!" I waved Slater's hand.

I could only marvel at Slater. He's intelligent for his age, I just wonder why he's not as developed as Aneeza. Lina's species should develop just as quickly.

I asked my doting mate and the answer was obvious. Slater may have been born earlier, but he spent a month in an egg before he broke out into the world.

Lina's delivery was a rough one—her egg was larger than it should have been for her body size and Leera helped by healing her afterwards. Lina then spent a month holding her egg, protecting it, and keeping it warm until Slater was ready to say hello.

I stroked Lina's hair and mended her internal injuries. For now it may be better to separate her fallopian tubes from the rest. I don't want her to die if she delivers without me or Leera around.

As my townsfolk still came out one by one, I opened the gate to the zombie room.

"Gather your things and enter. I'm sorry, but we can't stay here any longer."

Reginauld came over to me, my daughter holding his daughter's hand. "Then, if you'll pardon my asking, where shall we go?"

I slowly grinned. "Therograd. I have a feeling I know who sent those clerics and mages, and if he wishes to wipe out my home and my people then I'll return the favor."

I still can't figure out why Thrall was there to meet them, and why he was alone. I have a suspicion, though. I looked for the raven-haired crow woman. When I found her she laughed.

"I know what you're going to ask, and yes, I sent him. Theresa is not dead, not so long as she has followers, and now your enemy has become her new champion. Thrall's sacrifice, the poor dear, was necessary. But he knew what it

was I asked of him. This land was corrupted, its people had been tainted by her. Now in time the land will recover, free of her influence."

My mouth hung open as I stared at her, my brows knit. She had orchestrated this...this genocide. Robbed me of my first home, denied everyone's work. "No, this place may never recover, and these plague flies may well spread. I lost a friend, a home, and an entire landscape. This is not a victory."

She poked me with one of her boney claws. "The alternative was that we all died underground from that white mage's purge spell, and in few decades Theressa would've regained her foothold as if we never existed."

I swallowed my anger. "Then you did the right thing. I don't care if the world dies as long as my people are safe. But Thrall was one of my people. Don't ever use a person like a tool again. From now on, tell me directly and we'll plan through it together."

I then met up with my daughters. I hugged each of them except Belairia because it was still too awkward. The rest wondered off but Belairia stayed behind.

Belairia looked around. "Where's Miss Liz?"

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

Belairia shook me. "But she was strong! There's no way she... She can't be gone!"

I held her close, but this time there was no bear hug. Instead she cried until her eyes were red.

"There are things that even I can't do. Trust me, I replay it all the time trying to think if something could be different, but it's too late now."

There's going to be a lot of this from now on. I hugged her tight and rocked her. "Please don't tell the rest yet. I want them to get settled in first. Then I'll let everyone know what happened."

She looked up at me, her face still contorted, her chin twitching. It took all my strength not to cry with her, but I

can't do that yet. "I have to be strong, and now so do you. I think that if I were to talk about it now I might lose myself for a while and the way you are, you'd be right there with me. That's not what my people need to see after losing everything they've worked so hard on. They need to stay positive, and we need to show them how."

I ruffled her hair and she closed her eyes and rested her head on me. "I know, Daddy."

"You have to stop calling me that after what almost happened. I get a different meaning out of it now."

She wiped her face and grinned. "I know... Daddy."

I laughed. "It's too early for you to know about that stuff, but..." I leaned down and kissed her. "We could both use some cheering up. I'm sorry for not listening to you earlier. I won't treat you like a kid anymore."

She jerked back and touched her lips with her fingers, then grinned like an idiot. She smiled and almost tripped over a rock while walking to the gate.

"Sup!"

"Ah, the morbid sister cometh." I gave Lil'sis a hug and she popped my back for me.

"So, I see some zombies in there."

"Yeah, that place is full of them. It's the dark academy!"

Her eyes lit up and she held her mace close, fidgeting with it. "YES! ...I mean, cool, yeah, I guess I could check it out."

"I see no reason why you couldn't study there."

I called out to Eolania, the girl I met when I took my ill-fated shortcut out a window.

She came over, and Wilford, my eight-foot zombie, and a host of former crusader zombies she made followed.

Lil'sis beckoned and a host of her own zombies trotted up beside her. "...Cool zombies."

"Yeah, this one's my first, his name's Wilford!"

As I left them to talk I couldn't help noticing Lil'sis smiling under her hood. I'm glad she's making friends that aren't

already dead.

As expected, Ralphus and Languoria were glued together again. Ralphus's face was brimming with happiness and also lipstick? I'll have to ask her about that later. I'd love to see some of my mates all dressed up at some point.

Most everyone was out of the warren, so it was easy to make my way inside. I yelled out and Leera yelled back.

I followed her voice and found her and Healer making stretchers to carry the injured.

"What happened here?"

"Scouts from when the soldiers first arrived. We've been doing all we can to keep them alive for when you got back. No one, not a single one of them, doubted you would return." She pointed to a few gobs in the back; their eyes were closed. "When they heard you were back they finally gave up. They suffered for so long just so they could know you were all right."

I hugged her from behind and kissed along her neck. "I'll bring them back, all of them, so you both can rest now. I've missed you so much. I dreamed of seeing you again. You're the one that keeps me sane, and a lot has happened."

I buried my face in her hair as she hugged my arms. "Welcome home, my love." She tilted her head back and I leaned in and kissed her.

I wanted to lay together with her and tell her of all the evils in the world, to bare my soul and feel her body pressed against mine. But I resisted.

Instead I settled for another kiss and got to work on my gobs. Internal injuries, mainly from arrows. It was an easy fix for all of them. I mended them and reinfused their souls. They cheered when they saw me. These were people from my berserkers. They laughed and punched each other and me as we told a few battle stories. Ah, I've missed these guys, too.

I told them about the gate and they seemed excited to go show off to the other races by challenging them to spar. I

shook my head; hopefully they didn't mean sparring like I did with them.

"Healer, go with them, I have a feeling you'll be needed soon."

He bowed and obediently followed behind them as I once again held Leera in my arms.

"Oh, Healer boy, you're going to spar too, huh?" A grizzled gob slapped him on the back and he nearly toppled over.

I begrudgingly let go of Leera. "You'd better go too. I can feel trouble brewing."

She gave me a goodbye kiss and lingered for a few seconds before walking off after them.

Up against the far wall I saw Red and Blue sitting in a corner. Red was writing something on a sheet of paper with a quill that seemed like it would snap at any moment while Blue fiddled with a bronze breastplate.

"Why're you two still here?"

Red sighed. "She needs to make the opening bigger."

I looked up at it then back down at them. "Yeah, I'll go tell her. But first is there anyone else here?"

Red absently pointed to the dark side of the massive room. I nodded to him and made my way there. There were four unlikely friends sitting there talking about something.

Blondie, Threscia, Caroline and Roscia were having a serious debate. I used stalk and dark armor as I approached.

Blondie spoke up. "So, one controlled dragons, the other one was on some sort of ice wall, and the last one was a dwarf that couldn't fight? Who could believe such a tale?"

Caroline laughed. "Well, you just had to watch it, you'd be hooked if—"

"Ooh, let's tell them about that one with the zombies," Threscia interrupted.

Roscia shoved her. "Not again, Lil'sis hasn't been right since you told her that one."

"Then what about the one where everyone's an animal girl and they fight? The honey badger girl was great."

"Pfft, I know that one already. Hell, he gave me furry titties there for a while, I almost became the real-world version of it."

They all laughed again.

"But seriously, Caroline, what's a legal loli or a blue waffle?"

I came out of stalk and dark armor. "Why are you ladies still in here?"

"John!" Roscia ran over and hugged me.

"I was just leaving." Blondie smirked at me as she walked past.

"Oh, Blondie, inside the gate you'll find a human noble. I don't know if you know him, but he might know where your family is."

Hopefully they aren't around here.

She nodded and I sent Roscia with her.

"Caroline, stay away from the elves in red robes. Nothing good can come of talking to them."

"O-okay, is it something else that can kill me? Fuck this world!"

"Er, no, no one will kill you there, but I'd still recommend you not get involved."

She punched my shoulder as she walked past. "Alright then, I'll leave you with your legal loli now!"

I felt a cold sweat run down my back as she laughed.

Threscia smirked at me with her hands on her hips. "Sooo, I've got something to show you."

"Oh?" I smiled at her as I moved closer.

'Come, meet daddy!'

A bunch of hand-sized gray Fernandos came down from the ceiling on webs and crawled on me.

Calming Effect!

My skin prickled with goosebumps as they crawled up my body. "D-did you say daddy!?"

Threscia smiled her ear-to-ear grin as she ran her hand down her face. "Yes! What do you think of our babies?"

Calming Effect!

I held out my hand and a few of them crawled onto it, their little beady eyes glowing as they used Life Sense.

"My god..."

"Daddy!" they raised their little pincers in the air and waved them around.

Aww, I can't stay creeped out by these things. I gave them all little belly rubs.

"So then these are—"

"I told you, one human one, one insect one. If you want a human baby then we need to try a few more times." She blushed. "N-not that that's an invitation or anything, but I did miss you."

I put my little ones on my shoulder and embraced Threscia. She retracted her chitin and we held each other for a while.

"Oooh, brothers and sisters soon," the little fernandos chanted.

"Shush, come here." She held out her hand and they crawled up her arm.

"I'll be waiting inside that gate you talked about. Don't keep me hanging."

I kissed her and ran my fingers through her long hair. "I wouldn't dream of it."

I moved up the stairs and saw Fura waiting inside the gate. "Aren't you forgetting someone?"

"Ah!"

She jumped out of the gate and ran back into her warren. She emerged carrying a small bush and several small bags of something. She then ran back through the gate.

"No, someone bigger!"

She pacepalmed and ran back into her warren muttering something in forrestkin. She emerged again with one of the small cows.

"Red and Blue, dammit!"

She looked around then widened the opening to the warren.

Blue came out and sighed heavily. Red shoved him up the stairs and followed with two cages nestled in his arm.

"Chickens?"

"Yes!" Reginauld spoke up. "Our egg hunter was successful with the help of some of the townsfolk."

"Ha, that's great!"

I walked in and closed the gate leaving my town behind.

Next stop, Therograd, but first...

I gathered my mates, new and old. "They have baths here. Come with me."

"Reginauld, watch the kids for a while, me and their mommies have some catching up to do."

We laughed and splashed. I can't believe how much lighter they make my world.

Deathcreator Book 3: Ambient Decay — End

A Word From The Author:

This is not the end of the Deathcreator series. I just wanted to thank all my readers and supporters as well as the awesome reader communities such as goodreads and groups like Harem Lit.

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